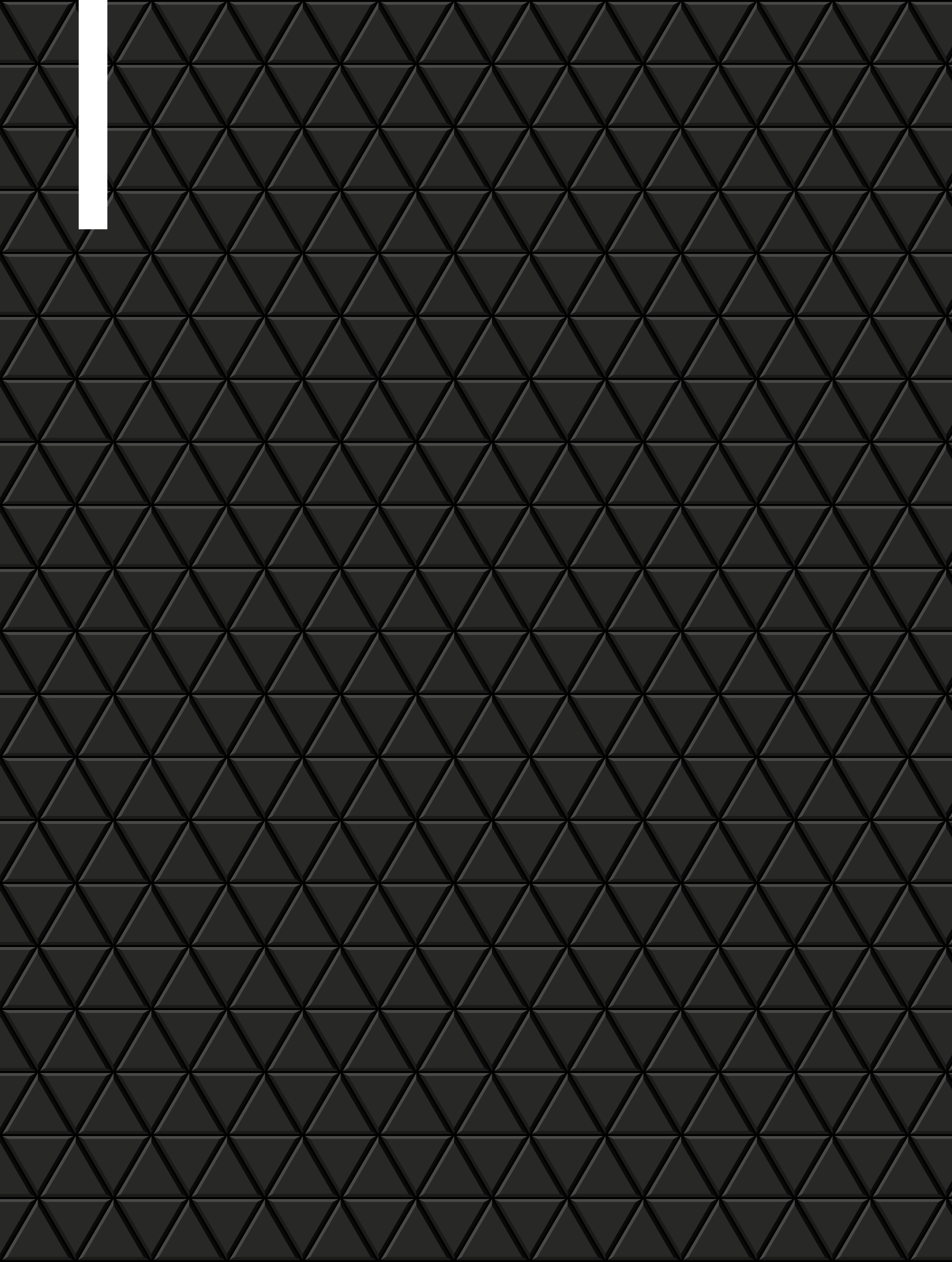


ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS
EDGE
THE FUTURE OF ENTERTAINMENT
#311
NOVEMBER 2017



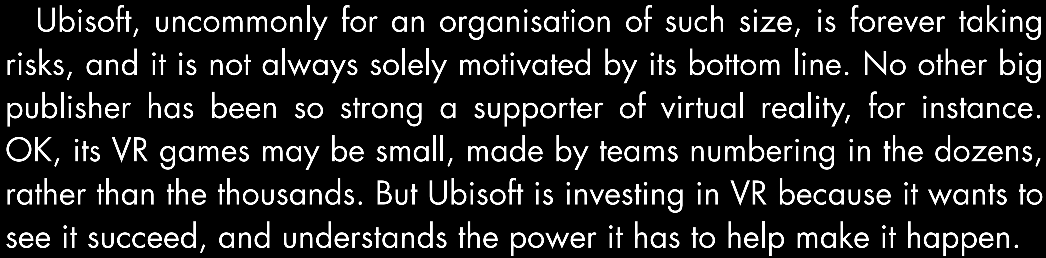
Pick up your silly twig, you're playing with the big boys now

The evening before Ubisoft's E3 conference, we sat in the function room of a hotel in downtown Los Angeles and watched as a procession of senior staff laid out, one by one, the games Ubisoft would be announcing the following day. Rare, you might think; risky, even, in an era where leaking information is so easy. But Ubisoft does it every year.



Exclusive subscriber edition

With good reason, too. We weren't just treated to trailers; indeed, we didn't see many. Instead we heard about the thought processes behind each game, on how they were made and why. We were given context: something that is lacking amid the frenetic news cycle of an E3 or Gamescom, but which casts Ubisoft in a more accurate – and, yes, far more flattering – light.



Ubisoft, uncommonly for an organisation of such size, is forever taking risks, and it is not always solely motivated by its bottom line. No other big publisher has been so strong a supporter of virtual reality, for instance. OK, its VR games may be small, made by teams numbering in the dozens, rather than the thousands. But Ubisoft is investing in VR because it wants to see it succeed, and understands the power it has to help make it happen.



So for this issue, we thought we'd try and shine a bit of a spotlight on a publisher which is flawed, certainly – they all are. But it is fascinating, too, a colossal, multinational concern that makes impossibly vast games across timezones around the clock, while still finding time to take a punt on things that might not pay off. And so, throughout this issue you'll find reports on one of the most intriguing, and most maligned, companies in videogames.

Yet if it's risk you want, our cover game has you, well, covered. After a year on the sidelines – a feat of financial derring-do measurable in the millions its absence wiped off Ubisoft's balance sheet – *Assassin's Creed* is back, and it's been substantially overhauled. It was the one game absent from that pre-E3 presentation, and with good reason: there's simply too much that needs to be explained. The *Origins* story begins on p62.





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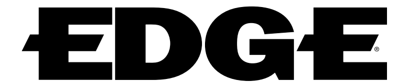
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Power up

With the big guns falling silent at Gamescom, those on the periphery take their chance to shine

Something was always going to have to give. Over the past few years, the videogame event circuit has grown steadily busier, and that puts a certain pressure on publishers and platform holders. How can you have a meaningful presence at Gamescom, just a couple of months after E3? Sony decided a few years ago that it couldn't, preferring to focus its efforts on Paris Games Week in October, and PlayStation Experience in December. Now, it appears, Microsoft has joined its rival. It notionally had a big presence at Gamescom, since the show represented the first chance for a European audience to get its mitts on Xbox One X. In reality, it had precious little else. Microsoft's new console should have been the star attraction of this year's show; instead it was Angela Merkel, flanked by cosplayers as if acting out a live-action *Smash Bros* character-select screen, then touring the floor to pretend to understand *Farming Simulator*. If it helps, Madam Chancellor, us neither.



There would be no repeat of the Phil Spencer-helmed media briefings of previous years. Instead, we got an informal, yet somehow still overlong live stream. Graeme 'AceyBongos' Boyd, social marketing manager at Xbox UK; TV and radio presenter Julia Hardy; and Xbox Germany comms manager Maxi Gräff squeezed into a sofa on a set seemingly borrowed from The Gadget Show, cheered by the production staff off camera. It was a remarkably low-rent offering from a company trying to sell a high-end product in Xbox One X, but rather set the tone for what was, from start to finish, something of a b-team effort. There was no sign of Spencer or Penello, but we got Greenberg and Loftis, faux-chatty on another sofa, falling over their poorly remembered lines. Just use the teleprompter, gang. We expect a script from Microsoft; we have no problem with it being read, rather than memorised.

Boyd repeatedly lamented the fact that his US counterpart, Larry 'Major Nelson' Hryb, could not be there to join them. At the end, he got his wish, weird as it was, as Hryb, via video link, unboxed the Project Scorpio edition of Xbox One X. Microsoft would later confirm it was the only version of the console that was currently available to



German chancellor Angela Merkel, flanked by the organisers of Gamescom and, behind her, what we assume is her cabinet

preorder, the company wilfully soiling the only good-looking console it has ever made with neon-green text referring to the hardware's codename. It was a strange decision, and one that felt oddly appropriate given the show that preceded it, since it, too, was full of them. It seemed Microsoft had told the presenters to name every game before its trailer rolled, meaning Hardy took the wind out of the sails of the night's only truly exciting announcement, Frontier's licensed theme-park sim *Jurassic World Evolution*.

That intriguing proposition aside, this was largely a reheated E3. It had the same trailers, perhaps interspersed with some awkward developer interviews. There were a barrage of promotional efforts for Microsoft's Twitch alternative, Mixer, including giveaways to the four-and-a-half people watching the show through it. There were some perfectly logical concessions to the local audience – playing to Germany's enduring love of strategy games, for instance, with a lengthy *Age Of Empires* anniversary stream the following day. Yet by and large this was light on news and high on cringe, which really is no way to drive interest in the most powerful console ever made. Microsoft, fairly, would no doubt observe that it did that at E3 – which is precisely the point. The company hasn't emerged the clear winner from E3 in a generation; this year, it put all its eggs in a basket in western Los Angeles, knowing that Sony, with PS4 Pro and PSVR already out, would be having a fallow year. Little wonder there was nothing left for Gamescom.

It was a remarkably low-rent offering from a company trying to sell a high-end product

Still, the absence of the big boys made this an opportunity for companies below them in the market-cap league tables to have their moment in the sun. EA used its livestream broadcast to highlight the games that wouldn't have gone over so well at E3: there was some well-deserved stage time for the delightful *Fe*, and a regionally appropriate emphasis on *FIFA 18*. Next came a bizarre BMW unveiling tied to *Need For Speed Payback*, and even a wheeling out of *The Sims 4* and its new Cats & Dogs expansion. Cue much cooing from the audience, which only intensified when a non-polygonal Actual Dog was carried out on stage. Gif Pom has, it says here, 6.4 million followers on Instagram; EA has been open about its bid to use influencers more in its marketing, and this was perhaps the crudest (if cutest) expression of it so far. Elsewhere, YouTubers and shoutcasters read scripts over match footage and tried to make it seem authentic – and fair play, the bullet points were almost imperceptible. At least Gif Pom got nothing out of it beyond a handful of treats, a bunch of tickles and a sweet promotional T-shirt. Behind the scenes, big money is changing hands, and the lines between player and marketeer are becoming ever more blurred. It's frustrating, because creatively,



The main draw at the Xbox stand was *Playerunknown's Battlegrounds*, though confusion reigned over just how exclusive it is to the console. Microsoft flew in dozens of the world's best players for a show-floor tournament that was watched online by millions

IMPERFECT MERKEL

Securing the head of Germany's parliament to open the show was certainly a coup for Gamescom's organisers. But Angela Merkel's opponents were quick to point out the apparent cynicism in her choosing to appear for the first time at one of Germany's biggest consumer shows with an election looming, and her main opponent, Martin Schulz, targeting urban voters and enjoying success on social media. Still, there's no disputing the quality of her stops on her tour of the show floor. *Anno* developer Ubisoft Blue Byte gave the German gamedev perspective; PlayStation focused on VR; while her *Minecraft* presentation came from a teacher expounding on its educational merits. The *Farming Simulator* stop, we assume, was just a bit of fun.

EA is in ruder health than it has been in years. Yet its marketing strategy has never been more distasteful.

In the absence of any show-stopping announcements, EA's shindig displayed the extent to which publishers and platform holders are continuing to support games long after their release. It gave a full 15 minutes – and the end-of-show headline slot – to a *Battlefield 1* match to promote its upcoming DLC. That was something of a recurring theme: Nintendo used its Gamescom presence not only to showcase the imminent likes of *Super Mario Odyssey* and *Metroid: Samus Returns*, but also to highlight new content drops for *Arms* and *Splatoon 2*. Blizzard, which held its own live show, is a past master at this sort of thing, and duly obliged with updates on *Overwatch*, *Hearthstone* and the now 13-year-old *World Of Warcraft*. Elsewhere, Square Enix flipped the script by announcing a chibi demake of *Final Fantasy XV* – a game which has grown and improved a lot since launch – for smartphones (and, director Hajime Tabata appeared to tease, Switch). The lack of big news is a lot easier to swallow when you realise there's tons of new content coming to games that you've already paid for.

In any case, frustrating as it may have been for international observers to come away from the show without a set of E3-rivalling announcements, that is not really Gamescom's point. While the LA event opened its doors to the public for the first time this year, in Cologne, the fans come first – and in huge numbers.

Over 350,000 people flowed through the Koelnmesse's doors this year to sample more games, from more companies, with a more international flavour than ever before. The German games-buying public does not put down the controller after a session with *The Crew 2* and complain that Ubisoft had simply brought its LA demo and couldn't even be bothered changing the in-game racer handles (which all had 'E3' in them). They were just happy to have played *The Crew 2*, or *Forza 7*, or *Super Mario Odyssey* – or any number of smaller, less-known games that the hit-obsessed industry wouldn't give the time of day at E3. That they did so on the same hallowed ground where Merkel once pretended to know what *Minecraft* was? Merely a welcome bonus.

And off the beaten showfloor track, vital work was being done. Congresses focusing on media, esports, and marketing; a new developer conference; even an area dedicated to the German national elections – this is about more than just playing games, and every year Gamescom finds new ways to reflect that. It's a community event, too. A social media stage hosted live music, a cosplay contest and YouTube personalities. The Family And Friends area acknowledged that gaming is now a multigenerational pastime, and that the little horrors need things to do during school holidays. And off campus, the Gamescom City Festival once again saw the event extend across Cologne with live music, poetry slams, talent shows and more kinds of sausage and lager than you ever thought could possibly exist. E3 is a showcase, a gloriously opulent display of resources that, for all its magic and its influence, has a rather narrow focus. Gamescom has flashes of all those things, but it is also a festival, celebrating not only of broader medium, but all the things that surround it, too. We may not have seen much you could truly call new. But no one left disappointed. ■



Despite the increase in visitor numbers, the show didn't feel too busy – perhaps the tumult of E3 prepared us a little better. Having the run of the place for a day before the doors officially opened helped, admittedly



Murder, he wrote

Deadly Premonition creator Hidetaka Suehiro is back with another whodunnit

The collected works of **Hidetaka Suehiro** don't exactly portray a man troubled by the confines of convention. Better known by his alias Swery65, Suehiro has mastered a craft of mystery games that are eccentric, mischievous and – whether by accident or design – sometimes thoroughly bewildering. With his next release, *The Good Life*, he is hoping to satisfy the cultural forefathers that established the whodunnit genre, after an unlikely journey deep into middle England.

Suehiro's work, curiously, had previously taken him to Hitchin, a modest UK market town that's all timber-framed buildings, ancient churches and chocolate-box side streets. "I was really interested in how they were upholding English traditions while changing and adapting to the new generation," he says of his stay in the Hertfordshire town. It reminded him, too, of the kinds of places in which his favourite classic crime yarns were set.

"I've created several mysteries over my career, and I've read my share of Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie," he tells us. "They're 'Mystery 101' to me. I suppose I always wanted to try and write a mystery story set in England at least once. I've always thought that maybe if I created a mystery set in England, then all the people who've previously created mysteries there would approve of me."

It turns out, then, that even the most free-spirited creatives sometimes yearn for the respect of their cultural predecessors. It's in that mindset that Suehiro set out to make *The Good Life*, which he's seeking to finance through the profit-sharing crowdfunding platform Fig.

Yet none of that means the game will be conventional. Far from it, in fact. *The Good Life* tells of Naomi, an American photojournalist who becomes trapped by her debts in a twee little town in rural England. And in Swery's imagined patch of English countryside, as night falls, the residents turn into cats. While this might suggest the eerie peculiarities of The Twilight Zone, or the 'town with a secret' focus of Ray Bradbury's writing, would be among Suehiro's influences, he points instead to the works of Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy and William Makepeace Thackeray, along with copious episodes of Miss Marple, as his significant points of inspiration. He says he'd always wondered about what the feline perspective on a human world felt like. Little wonder: he once lived in a house with a dozen cats.

> "I've created several mysteries over the course of my career, and I've read my share of Agatha Christie"

For now, the final expected shape of *The Good Life* remains, appropriately enough, a mystery – even to Suehiro and his recently formed studio, White Owls. There are absolutes, though, such as the game offering what Suehiro refers to as a 'daily RPG'. "When some people hear the phrase 'RPG', they may think of things like levelling up, but I don't intend to put levels or XP in this game – at least, not at this point," he says. "Instead of gaining XP, the player will be able to pay off Naomi's massive debt. As the amount goes down, the villagers' behaviour will change, and Naomi will gain more daily money that she can use – that she doesn't need to save for paying off the debt. Instead, players will be able to unlock new sources of income to earn money more efficiently, and upgrade their equipment."

For anyone who feels ensnared by a career or bogged down by the daily administration of life – paying down debt is hardly a far-flung fantasy, if we're honest – this might all come across as something of a turn-off. But Suehiro insists its implementation will be playful, even if he isn't quite ready to specify just how it's all going to fit together. "I'm positive that this is going to be fun," he says. "For real. I'm just worried about someone stealing my ideas!"

Certainly, the protagonist's career will be significant, with players taking and filing photographs for clients. She'll also likely find herself with local work to do. And then there's the mystery of those cats to crack. Beyond that, details are thin on the ground – but Suehiro has already given his ardent fanbase all they need by promising that the game will continue in the 'spirit' of *Deadly Premonition*.

Indeed, *The Good Life* may even be set in the same universe as his 2010 cult hit, even if Suehiro isn't exactly sure how. "It's hard to really define what the 'spirit' is," he says, then pauses for a while. "I guess if I had to put it in words, I'd just say it's 'Swerism'. That's the word we use in development.

"Embarrassing, huh? All the games I've made so far come from a shared universe. Lately, I've been calling it the 'Sweryverse', but only at my company, and it's difficult to figure out how to define it in an official sense. But every game I've worked on – even the games I made while at SNK, and everything afterwards, including *Deadly Premonition* and *D4*, and *The Good Life* – they all operate in the same realm of logic. I'm positive of that." ■

BINARY DOMAIN

***Deadly Premonition* was wildly polarising. To some, it was an exquisitely considered masterwork; to others, an erratic mess. For many it was both, and that was precisely why it resonated with them. Perhaps that's why Suehiro sees this binary, good-or-bad question as limiting creativity. "When I was young, especially when I was first starting out as a creator, I selected what I thought were 'good' and 'bad' games, and tried to crush all the elements that I thought came from bad games in order to create good ones," he says. "But now, as someone who's over 40 years old, I feel that games are simply games. I think that once people understand how difficult it is to create something, they change their way of thinking."**





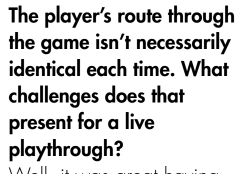
In case you hadn't worked it out yet, Swery's new studio is called White Owls. We hope this sparks a new trend of literal gamedev photoshoots

Notes from a small island

Dear Esther Live brings The Chinese Room's Hebridean adventure to UK concert halls

The Chinese Room's award-winning adventure *Dear Esther* made its stage debut at London's Barbican last year. The studio's creative director Dan Pinchbeck played the game alongside a live narrator, with an orchestra performing **Jessica Curry**'s hauntingly beautiful soundtrack. Now, it's going on the road. Here, Curry explains the process behind bringing this unique interactive performance to UK theatre audiences.

Where did the idea for a live performance of *Dear Esther* originate?
Jessica Curry: I went to this amazing British Film Institute event called Film, Archive and Music Lab, where they brought together international composers and producers. They took us to the Barbican to meet Chris Sharp, their contemporary music programmer. I got in touch with him after the week was up and said, "I've got a bit of a crazy idea. How would you feel about putting on a show with *Dear Esther* being played live, with a live actor narrating and live musicians?" He didn't play games, but he said, "This sounds amazing – it's what the Barbican is here for, to try new things, to experiment." It turned out to be really technically complex. We had to do a new build of the game, with all the cues for the conductor and for the actor. But they were very supportive – and they were delighted afterwards because something like 64 per cent of the audience had never been to the Barbican before. A lot of people came up to me and said, "I've actually never been in a classical concert hall before". For me, that was so exciting.



What sort of technical complexities?
Well, we obviously cut out the music and the narrator. We left ambient sound in, so the wind and footsteps were still there. But introducing these triggers turned out to be quite complicated, and we had different feeds of the game: the conductor has his own screen, so it would say 'conductor cue one' when Dan was playing the game, and he'd walk over a certain point, and then he would know to cue the musicians. Then we had to have a separate output with separate cues for the actor, saying 'actor cue four' for example, so he knew when to go as well. There was a lot going on for the performers on the night.

The player's route through the game isn't necessarily identical each time. What challenges does that present for a live playthrough?
Well, it was great having Dan play the game for the initial two runs of the show, because he obviously knows the game so well – he can take a different path, but he knows exactly where the trigger points are and that he'll get to them eventually. To us, that was one of the most exciting things, and this is where, for me, it differed so hugely from the traditional model of scoring a film. This is going to be subtly different at every venue, and that interactivity is the exciting thing about this show.

Have you made a conscious decision to try to play it a specific way each time?
No, I think it would feel too stagey for us. What Dan found was that he was responding to the musical conductor and his interpretations of the pieces, and the way the musicians played. That was really unexpected, and something we hadn't planned, because we'd only had one rehearsal with the live musicians. And then on the night Dan said he was really inspired by the way they played. He knows the original soundtrack so well, but it's five years later and the players have changed and they haven't played the music for a long time, and they brought something very different to the music. And you could see that James Morgan, the conductor, was watching the big projection of the game and that he was responding in turn to the way Dan was playing. Dan would do a really lyrical sweep, and James was holding the musicians, just letting it pause for longer to get that shot.



Jessica Curry recently completed her score for The Chinese Room's Google Daydream VR game, *So Let Us Melt*



It must be unusual to experience your work being performed in that context. How does it differ from your memories of composing the music?
For me, there's nothing like live music. But yes, it was eight or nine years ago now, because I composed it for the original mod. So it had a life as a sampled piece of music before we could afford to get the string quartet and the musicians to re-record it for the commercial version of *Dear Esther*. And we didn't know whether it would stand the test of time, whether the game would look dated. But we were really pleased at how strong it still is as an experience. And Rob Briscoe's visuals are so beautiful. I can't wait for the tour – at the London Games Festival, I found a place where I could turn and see some of the audience watching the experience, and people were rapt. And it doesn't get much better than that, to see these people who are completely in the moment watching something that you created. ■

The team thinks that *Dear Esther Live* can reach a broad audience outside games, from contemporary theatregoers to fans of visual art



Writer Thomas McMullan has replaced Dan Pinchbeck for the tour, as the show promises to make the player feel like more of a performer, with their own individual spotlight





The first performance of Dear Esther Live was a fraught one, since the tech rehearsal revealed an uncomfortable truth. "We hadn't added an invisible wall, so in the first build, you could fall off the cliffs and die!" Curry laughs

ORCHESTRAL MANOEUVRES

Getting Dear Esther ship-shape for life on the road



Producer **Laura Ducceschi** has worked with major art organisations for the past decade. She approached Curry after watching the first live performance of *Dear Esther* at the Barbican. "I'm not somebody who generally comes in as a producer on a project that I'm not creatively involved with from the early stages," she says. "But in this case, as somebody who is interested in immersive sonic and visual work, it blew my bloody mind." The concert hall venues chosen for the tour should, she says, offer the optimal environment to showcase Curry's score. "The score is beautiful, but it's very minimal, and in the most tender moments, we need to amplify it with crystal clarity so it really fills the room."



THE PLANETS SUITE

How music inspired a puzzle game of grand chromatic scale

When we ask developer Lucas Govatos what influenced the striking visuals of *Epitasis*, his firstperson sci-fi puzzle adventure, we expect to hear certain answers. Sure enough, Govatos namechecks *The Witness* and *No Man's Sky*. What we don't expect is that the candy-hued locales are also the product of a kind of artistic synaesthesia. "My main inspirations are electronic artist Tycho, and also Boards of Canada," he tells us.

"Both have a unique style that takes you somewhere else entirely," Govatos says. "Music is the main thing I head to when I'm in need of both inspiration and motivation to work on art." Travel, too, has helped him lend *Epitasis* its vividity: "I went on a trip to Costa Rica for a month, and it had a large influence on trying to bring in the colourful, lively style of the country." Navigating the non-linear universe via space-bending portals, however, is designed to be meditative. Players piece together, at their own pace, the mystery of a fallen alien civilisation, solving laser puzzles and reactivating long-forgotten technology.

Epitasis is about halfway through development, with Kickstarter backers providing feedback, and Govatos plans to continue making fine mechanical adjustments right up until release next summer. But for him, the game's magic lies in its aesthetic. "Art has been a big focus of mine, not just for this project, but in my life, so creating something beautiful was – and still is – a high priority. There aren't many sci-fi exploration games with super-colourful vistas, and there should be more." ■



You're not completely alone out here. An ancient drone helps you find hidden items and navigate the interstellar wilderness. Not all of them are amicable, however

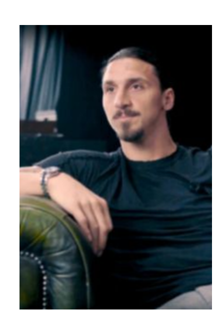
Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"Videogames are of the utmost importance as cultural assets, as a driving **force for innovation** and as an economic factor."

And especially handy for courting the youth vote in an election year, we suppose, **Angela Merkel**



"The kids, when they play it, they need to **feel like they're me.** They need to feel like they're a superhero, saving the planets."

Footballer **Zlatan Ibrahimovic** unveils his new game with a display of his famous modesty



"To say that **Yoko-san saved Platinum** would not be an exaggeration. I cannot thank him enough."

We knew *Nier: Automata* was something special, but who would've guessed it would make **Hideki Kamiya** *nice*?

"People pick Xbox because we have the biggest franchises, **the biggest exclusives,** whether you are a fan of *Halo*, or *Gears Of War*, or *Forza*."



True, Xbox marketing bod **Aaron Greenberg** – in a parallel universe where no other games or systems exist, at least

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Sega World Drivers Championships 2018
Manufacturer Sega

Hang on a minute, what year is it? Just months after launching *Daytona Championship USA*, Sega is at it again, proving there's more to the arcade scene in 2017 than videmption machines and roomy VR set-ups. The game in question is *Sega World Drivers Championships 2018*, and within a week of its announcement it had already been the subject of location tests in Japan.

While such tests are typically as much about marketing as they are gaining player feedback, here they were crucial, since the game supports cross-site multiplayer, allowing up to 45 players in different arcades to race each other in realtime – though multiple cabinets can still be linked together for purely local play. The action edges more towards the realistic end of the spectrum, with six-speed gearshift, an array of function buttons set into the force-feedback steering wheel, in-cabinet speakers to let you communicate with team members, and even an LED speedometer.

At the end of a race, a series of graphs rate your driving skill – measuring, for instance, how well you took corners – which feeds into your overall score. Driver records will be stored in the cloud for ease of access as you move between arcades. In Japan, anyway: given the cabinet's premium featureset and online functionality, a western release seems unlikely. But if Sega can reveal two arcade racers in a matter of months, we suppose anything's possible.



My Favourite Game
Ikonika

The producer and DJ on how the sounds of the 16bit era have shaped her musical career

Sara Abdel-Hamid produces and DJs under the name Ikonika. Her first album, Contact, Love, Want, Have, was released for revered bass-music imprint Hyperdub in 2010 and is shot through with videogame references, with track names such as Insert Coin and Look (Final Boss Stage); her latest release, Distraction, has a track called Not Gameplay Footage and a well-hidden, but very familiar sample: of Dyna and Tillo, the item-swapping crows from *Dark Souls II*. When we add Abdel-Hamid on Skype, we see her avatar is a *Dark Souls* character. After that, there is only one way this conversation is ever going to start.

Sticking our necks out here – you appear to like *Dark Souls*. Why sample the crows?
There's loads of *Dark Souls* samples scattered around the album – loads of little one-hits, and bits and pieces. There's a lot of 'voom' noises when you transition from the bonfire into different lands, or enter fog gates. In Hazefield [another album track], what is supposed to be the snare drum is one of those noises.

So do you play it yourself?
I can't get my head round it. I prefer *Bloodborne* because I hate having to block, I just want to go in and start killing everything. I'm not patient, and *Dark Souls* requires a lot of patience. But my husband plays it a lot, and there have been many times where I've just sat there watching him play it, watching him die, like, constantly. But I feel like he's not playing it properly because he always uses summons. I think he's cheating.

SMART STEPPER
Abdel-Hamid has been with Hyperdub for her entire musical career, and believes the label's founder, UK dubstep legend Steve 'Kode9' Goodman, saw in her a kindred spirit. "He knows where I'm coming from, and he's kind of the same: he has a fascination with Japanese videogame music, particularly rare stuff." Together with similarly minded producers of the era, such as Greedo and Joker, Abdel-Hamid brought a new flavour to the dubstep of the day, which she says was "very 'dred' and dark-sounding. We came and brightened it up using all these melodies that were reminiscent of *Streets Of Rage*, *Sonic* and those kinds of things."



You may reference games, but it's in a very subtle way. Few people would spot that *Dark Souls* sample, and there's a track on the album called BGM.
Everyone's like, 'What does BGM mean?' And I'm, like, 'Really? You didn't listen to videogame soundtracks?' To me that's just odd. These things come from my childhood, and now it kind of seeps into my music. It's just me. I was that kid that just wanted to escape everything; I would go into my little world of games, or music, or films.

You've acknowledged the influence that *Streets Of Rage* had on your sound. Even as a kid, were you particularly drawn to games with good music?
Totally. I was listening to hip-hop, R&B, freestyle house and a lot of Michael Jackson. I remember playing *Sonic The Hedgehog 3* and it having that New Jack Swing vibe – then years later, finding out that Michael Jackson actually did produce some of that stuff. *Sonic 3*… I'd never played a game with tunes like that. It's the same with *Streets Of Rage*, the way it sounded so, like, *techno* (laughs).

> "I was actually in tears at the end, I couldn't believe that a game was making me cry"

You may be sampling modern games, but do you get much time to play them?
I don't have much time. I'm playing a different game. I'm playing music.

You see it as a game?
I see a lot of things as a game! Making tunes is a game; each record is a different game with a different feel. I'm addicted to playing this right now, and unlocking as many achievements as possible. But I'll always play *GTA*, whenever a new one comes out, that's just a given. The only other game I've played recently is *The Last Guardian*.

What did you think of it?
It's beautiful. I played *Shadow Of The Colossus* on PS2, and that was a heartbreaking game for me. I was actually in tears at the end, I couldn't believe a game was making me cry. I like games like that, that can move you.

OK then: what's your favourite game?
Skate 3. It's the reason I still have my PS3. I play it with my niece and nephew and they just love it. We play Free Run, and if you bail you have to pass the controller, and we all shout 'Bail!' really loud. It just seems more realistic. Tony Hawk was like, 'Really, I'm grinding on these telephone wires?' It was a bit too easy.

I want to say one more. *Tekken*. The whole series, and the music, it's really Euro at times, it makes me laugh. And I've always been obsessed with Yoshimitsu. I wanted to be him for a very long time.

Why? The armour? The spinning attack? The weird spit move he does?
Just the idea he's a space ninja. How do I become a space ninja? (laughs) He's the only one whose moves I knew off by heart. He's a beautiful person, I think. ■



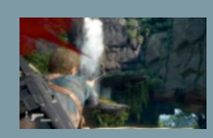
While her new album may be shot through with *Dark Souls* samples, Ikonika still ensures she stays true to her roots. "I still have Chun Li dying somewhere in there," she says. "I love that sound. It's almost become my ident"

WEBSITE



Capcom Fighters Network
bit.ly/capcomfn

Eighteen months after *Street Fighter V*'s launch, Capcom has updated the game's online stat-tracking website, Capcom Fighters Network – a process that meant the company has cruelly killed off V League, a community-run website that offered a similar service. Expect stat-tracking, both of your own record and those of the playerbase as a whole, including a game-wide measure of character win rates over the preceding month. You can set a regular foe as a rival to keep tabs on their progress, do likewise with a big name using the Respect tag, and browse moveset frame data for the entire cast. Since its miserable launch, *SFV* has come a long way, though its community remains small. Services like this might not lure in new players, but at least show Capcom's commitment to those who've stuck it out.



VIDEO

How Cover Systems Ruined Shooters
bit.ly/covershooter

Jon 'Turbo Button' Williams is part of the emerging set of critics using video to amplify their arguments rather than simply provide the backdrop for a screamy rant, and this searing deconstruction of the cover shooter stands out. Tracing a line from *Killswitch* right up to the present day, it's a smart, well-written, thoughtfully edited examination of how slow-paced, stop-and-pop action became the industry standard. It's also that rarest of YouTube commodities: a video that will improve your homepage recommendations, instead of dragging them into the gutter.

WEB GAME

Air Mail
bit.ly/airmailgame

"Aerial delivery service is a hard business", apparently. We disagree: puttering about in a tiny propeller plane is relaxing. Made in three days for the 39th Ludum Dare game jam, *Air Mail* tasks you with flying around picking up mail and taking it to the addressee. The delight is piloting your craft, holding X and the arrow keys to lift off. There's no time limit but fuel is a concern; lobbing barrels at the plane tops up the meter. Ensuring you have the momentum to glide to fuel is key, lest you're forced to walk. There's joy in every honk, whirr and landing bump, looping about like a mad swallow, scarf flapping in the wind. Our favourite letter-receiving reaction is Joanne's, who laments no longer being able to wait for the mail, sitting down in a very put-out manner. Perhaps this *is* a tough gig, after all.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

CONSOLE

Nintendo Classic Mini SNES
bit.ly/ncmsnes

Work ground to a halt when this finally arrived at **Edge** HQ. The teensy form factor delights, while the OS has some fine touches such as suspend points and screen filters. The real museum piece is the hitherto unreleased *Star Fox 2*: with multiple playable characters, vehicles and gently randomised level design, it's certainly a step up from its predecessor – but like so many early 3D games, it hasn't aged well. Nintendo's insistence that you clear the first level of *Star Fox* before you can load up the sequel is telling, dressing up sly expectation management as an unlock system. An essential purchase nonetheless – providing you can find one, anyway.



continue

Face up
Capcom fixes Chun-Li's weird features in *MVC: Infinite*

Atlas hugged
A new *No Man's Sky* update *almost* enables multiplayer

Playing nice
Microsoft and Sony are talking about cross-platform play

Cover band
Plans are afoot for something very special indeed

quit

Face down
Hey, PRs: please don't send us masks with our gurning fizzogs on

Crashed out
Will everyone please stop buying *N-Sane Trilogy*? It's getting silly now

Feast mode
Is there *anything* to eat at Gamescom that isn't a sausage?

Olivers twist
Best wishes to those affected by Radiant Worlds' recent troubles

TWEETS

Considering information encoding in the patterns on American Airlines' cabin carpet
John Carmack @ID_AA_Carmack
CTO, Oculus

My favorite part of the Xbox live event was when Notch stormed in and demanded that *Minecraft* only be bundled with the white colour Xbox One
Daniel Ahmad @ZhugeEX
Analyst, Niko Partners

Apparently I'm the worst person in the universe and also a wonderful genius? Good job I base my self-image entirely on social media
Paul Kilduff-Taylor @mode7games
Co-founder, Mode 7

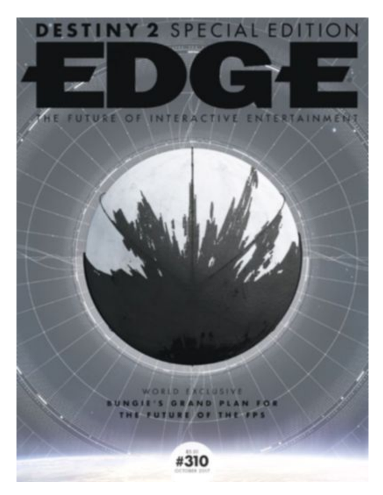
If Titanic was on YouTube, people would comment, "You forgot to mention that the boat sank. Edit: sorry, commented before the video was over"
Mark Brown @britishgaming
Creator, Game Maker's Toolkit



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DISPATCHES NOVEMBER



Issue 310

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a year's subscription to PlayStation Plus, courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment



PlayStation.Plus

Not a hero

To me, games are no longer the immersive experience they used to be. Granted, this is a subjective matter and this ageing gamer might have lost some of the enthusiasm, mental agility and leisure needed to enjoy a challenging deep dive. But I remain convinced that there is more to it.

Firstly, the medium fell victim to its own success: there are too many big, triple-A titles vying for our attention. Over the space of a year or so, across various platforms, I acquired *The Witcher 3*, *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided*, *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, *The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild*, *Uncharted 4* and more that I cannot remember (and I'm not even including the various racers, indie games, firstperson shooters or realtime strategy titles). Each of these games demands dozens of hours to be truly appreciated and I feel as if I've barely scratched the surface of any of them.

There is, apparently, evidence that people spend more time browsing the Netflix catalogue than they do actually watching movies. This is exactly how I have come to feel about games: it's too hard to choose. One risks missing out on so much by committing to one title or franchise, that one ends up getting all of them and not investing enough time to enjoy any. This of course works well as a business model – who cares if you actually play the games you buy? – but it falls short as far as artistic expression is concerned: so much is being created, and yet so little is being experienced.

Secondly, immersion is a difficult feeling to conjure and complexity is its enemy. In order to achieve the epiphany of 'being one' with the protagonist, one must master the controls to the point of not having to think about them at all. This was easy enough in early games – and still is – in reborn classics such as *Rez Infinite*, but in *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, having to memorise the mapping of every single button on the DualShock to various actions on foot, when driving the Nomad, or in the menus and sub-menus is a daunting task. In my experience, there's just enough variation from title to title to make me feel like I'm remote-controlling the character on-screen rather than playing as her, which can be illusion-shattering and frustrating in a firefight. That split-second wasted trying to remember how to change ammunition type can be the difference between life and death.

> "The medium fell victim to its own success: there are too many big titles vying for our attention"

The games of 2017 are remarkably rich, beautiful and complex compared to their forebears and, notwithstanding the novelty factor, they are arguably smarter too. Unfortunately, most of them require a level of such commitment and dedication that it clashes with their purpose as entertainment, a serious flaw that is further exacerbated by such a huge amount of worthy titles. I wonder if anyone is working on solving this impossible conundrum. Then again, perhaps my generation of gamers has become irrelevant and nobody cares about our failing brains.
Fabrice Saffre

First, welcome back to Dialogue, Fabrice! Now, to your problem: perhaps you need to think a little smaller. The bigger the game – whether in budget, or scope, or both – the likelier you sound to bounce off it. A handy experiment for you to try: avoid games with colons in the title. It'll open your eyes.

Serious Sam

Over a decade ago, this magazine ran a memorable cover story entitled 'Bored to Death of Videogames?' which seemed to be a shared opinion across the gaming world at that time. Thankfully, things did pick back up, but now I find myself in a similar



www.facebook.com/edgeonline
Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers

scenario again. As the midlife crisis has been and gone, I seem to spend more time reading about games than I do actually playing them.

I've probably been in a minority now for a long time, but I think it spoke volumes when *Destiny 2*'s recent beta was released. As it was locked behind the usual pre-order paywall, the only sight and sound of the game was via YouTube and streaming sites. On one stream, an overenthusiastic commentator was asked by a viewer to stop talking so he could listen to the story. What had me laughing out loud was that I didn't realise *Destiny* had a story, or needed one. It seems that a lot of recent, highly regarded classic games have endless dialogue trees and a roster of characters four times the size of the Lord Of The Rings novels, with a script to match. Chalk me up as a fan of the silent Link, and the actions-speak-louder-than-words *Souls* games.

But returning to *Destiny 2*, and in particular **E**310 – if it hadn't featured enough over the course of its development, then the record-breaking, 18-page special bordered on offensive with its fanzine-like length. As a subscriber, can I urge the editorial team to regroup and at least think of something new to put into the magazine to freshen it up? I don't detect that much new content in the past few years, and I don't want it to get to the point where I am bored to death of **Edge**.
Neil McAlister

We didn't play *Destiny* for the story either, but the fact that Bungie is trying to address one of the first game's major flaws in its sequel is just one of the reasons we chose to cover it. We realise not every cover game appeals to every reader. We hope the other 114 pages contained something that piqued your interest; if not, perhaps it's time you dug your Light Phaser out from the loft.

Absolver

It's been a year since *No Man's Sky* was released to very mixed reviews, down to the fact that a lot of what had been promised by Sean Murray in the build-up to release was missing, and the game slowly changed from an exploration game to a pointless one. Your only real options were to farm resources and get a bigger, better ship, and its campaign was too short, especially when you had a billion different planets to explore. Luckily, Hello Games has been adding free updates throughout the year to build the game that was shown off at E3 years ago. With the release of Atlas Rises, *No Man's Sky* feels like a game I could happily put hundreds of hours into. There's now a 30-hour story which has taken me from trying to find another fellow explorer – triangulating his position from planet to planet – to setting up my own base and workers to find this lost soul amongst the stars. The base-building has been available for a while now, but the main story gives you missions, sidequests and a more important reason to increase your standing with the three main alien races.

The game now has a beating heart – a purpose to all the exploring, grinding and upgrading you are doing. It finally feels fully realised: because of all that disappointment, Hello Games have finally made a game worthy of its triple-A price tag. Atlas Rises is a new beginning: with continued support and content from Hello Games, *No Man's Sky* can hopefully get people back on the hype wagon for what's next. A lot can change a game in a year, and this has set the benchmark.
Charlie Ridgewell

Quite right too. It seems that if you shout loud and long enough, your voice will eventually be heard and you'll get your way. Unless your name's Neil McAlister, that is.

Foul play

I don't usually feel compelled to write to you very often, but a letter in **E**310's Dispatches section had me raise a Roger Moore-esque eyebrow. It concerns the heart-wrenching tale of young Pierre Fouquet, battling through life's sorrows via the help of our old friend videogames. It was an X-Factoresque yarn so touching and emotional that you could practically hear the soft tinkly piano accompaniment. I'll admit it had me reaching for the Kleenex myself, until about halfway through when the ol' Spidey-sense started tingling something fierce. Poor old Pierre, bullied in school and only finding solace in the murder of make-believe people in *San Andreas*, then doing the same in higher fidelity later on with *GTAIV*. Time passes and things get better. But then his mother dies – a truly tragic event amplified by the fact he was only eight years old at the time.

But eight years old? *GTAIV* was released in 2008, *San Andreas* in 2004. So if time went on and he got steadily better before his mother died when he was eight, we might surmise it was sometime after the release of *GTAIV*. If she had died in 2009, within a year of *GTAIV*'s release, that would make him three when *San Andreas* was released – four, tops. I'm sure I don't need to tell anyone that not only is the game vastly inappropriate for a child of that age, but I very much doubt he would possess the fine motor skills at three years old to play it to the degree he claims. All of that isn't even taking into account the fact that he played it to find release from being bullied at school – a school that he would be too young to attend.

Forgive me if that rubs anyone up the wrong way, but he got Letter Of The Month for that drivel, when your man Robert August de Meijer (not me, by the way) slavered on for ages about AI in games and was far more worthy. Seems you were suckered in, reality TV-style, by the sob story – which is not your fault, incidentally. I blame Simon Cowell. We're all victims here.
Kenneth Russell

Heavens above, we've been had! We've always been suckers for a sob story, especially when the horrors of deadline are upon us. We suppose after that we're honour-bound to give you this month's PS Plus subscription – and Pierre, if you're reading this, do get in touch. The ball's in your court now, dear boy. ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

Somehow I've never got into playing videogames on my phone. I've owned a long succession of handhelds with actual physical buttons and, latterly, sticks, and have very fond memories of portable gaming on the GBA SP, the Neo Geo Pocket Colour, the PSP, the 3DS, the Vita, and so on. Indeed they are some of my fondest videogame memories altogether – a Christmas spent playing *Advance Wars*, a Greek holiday immersed in *Metal Gear Ac!d*. But playing games on a phone? It always seemed to be something that, you know, civilians do – people who don't really know anything about videogames. Everyone was just mindlessly swiping on stupid fruit-based puzzle games on public transport while I did something more productive and important with my journey, like listening to Queens Of The Stone Age.

In other words I was labouring under an unacknowledged snobbery. Sure, I had a brief blast on *Pokémon Go* last summer like everybody else, but I was sure that most phone games were basically worse than other kinds of game. Until very recently. For a couple of days, my girlfriend had been taking suspiciously long phone breaks while she was supposed to be working, and then she somewhat shamefacedly showed me the culprit: a thing called *Wooden Block Puzzle*. I was intrigued enough to look it up, and it turned out that it was one of hundreds of cynical clones of an original game called *1010!*, so that was the one I installed and began to play. And play. And play some more.

In case you aren't aware of the genre, *1010!* is essentially a kind of gravity-free *Tetris*, in which you place blocks of varying shapes and sizes into the playing area. Completed vertical and horizontal lines vanish, and the aim is simply to keep going. Play ends when the board is too full with pieces to place the next one.

It sounds very boring when I put it like that, but the exquisite design and feel makes it mesmerisingly pleasant. The particular stroke of genius here, I think, is that there is no rush. *Tetris* has an inbuilt time limit because the blocks fall at a minimum speed. But in *1010!* you can take as long as you want over any move. You can think properly. And, simple as its universe is, it is a persistent gameworld: blissfully, *1010!* lets you pause and return to your game after hours or days. Whenever you have time. You're in charge.

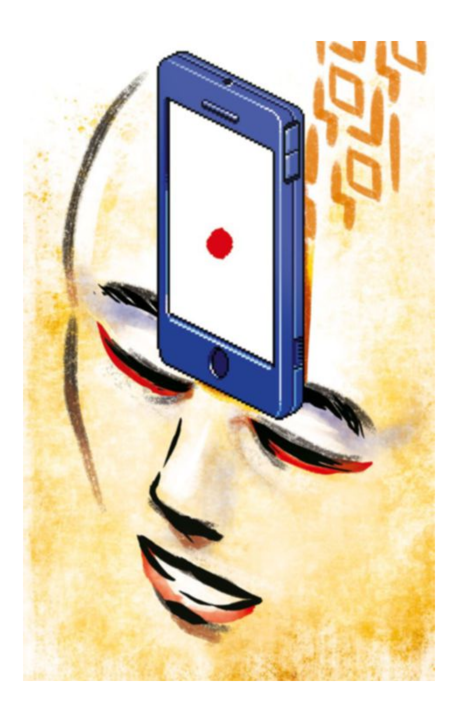


Illustration kaeru.com.ar

> Everyone was just mindlessly swiping on stupid fruit-based puzzle games on public transport

A decade ago I wrote a manifesto for 'slow gaming', expressing the hope that more videogames would not be structured like tedious real-world jobs, involving time-critical makework tasks rewarded with virtual currency. Since then slow gaming has of course flourished in many fields, such as the walking simulator or the anti-game. But perhaps *1010!* and its host of viral clones is the perfection of this Zen ideal. That's not to say that twitch gaming doesn't still have its place, as in the brain-melting kinetics of Housemarque's stunning recent collaboration with Eugene Jarvis, *Nex Machina*. But in an age where everything else is screaming at us and battering our attention with ostensible urgency, a game that stretches and relaxes time itself is wonderfully calming.

The story behind its creation is also inspiring. Turkish indie studio Gram Games, then a five-person outfit, had already released three unsuccessful games and was down to its last $15,000 of funding when the idea was first mooted. The game was released within a month and now has more than 40 million installs, driving healthy revenue through display ads. And the stress-free, slow-gaming quality of the experience was an explicitly thought-through decision, as CEO Mehmet Ecevit explained to Pocket Gamer: "As part of our focus on user experience, we decided not to impose any limits on time or lives." The result is a really beautiful modern classic. It's not surprising, if awesomely perverse, that some dedicated fans of the game have managed to score in excess of one million points, which represents literally weeks or months of full-time play.

Of course, most smartphone games are still at best meretricious trash and at worst price-gouging microtransaction rent-seekers, but that's only because the majority of cultural production in any medium is rubbish. The touchscreen smartphone may seem like a rebarbatively simplistic control interface to those of us who grew up on dedicated hardware, but it's an authentic platform for videogames. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have just bought *Mario Run* and am going to dive in. I may be some time.

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

At last, my son likes a videogame! Specifically, *Splatoon 2*. It was the Splatfest that did it, the eternal struggle between warring condiments proving an irresistible lure for a three-year-old. "Mayonnaise wi-ins," he'd sing-song after every victory, delighted. He sat tight by my side, watching me play, for a good hour. This is unprecedented. It helped, I expect, that I went on a tremendous winstreak. I've always played well in front of an audience.

There are obvious reasons why he was drawn to *Splatoon 2*: it is loud, happy and cartoonish, a game with a clear objective which revolves around splashing the place with bright, lurid colour. Or, more to the point, two colours. He is just starting to understand the notion of conflict; superheroes increasingly feature in his play, so he knows all about goodies (Superman; mayonnaise) and baddies (me; ketchup).

He is increasingly becoming used, then, to making binary choices. What is missing is a sense of nuance; of understanding that life is not so simple as good or bad. He assumed that, by siding with mayonnaise, I was saying I didn't like ketchup – not that I really like it with chips and bacon sarnies, but use its creamy cousin with a greater variety of foodstuffs, so narrowly sided with it. That understanding will come with age, or so you'd think. Looking at the standard of debate around certain issues in videogames these days, I'm no longer quite so sure.

There was a great deal of fuss recently when Warner Bros announced that *Middle-earth: Shadow Of War* would feature a loot-box system. I understand. As players, we are naturally suspicious of a publisher seeking to make more money from us after we've bought a game at full price. And that wariness naturally takes precedence over the educated player's understanding that game development is pricier than ever, so simply making a game has never entailed so great a risk, so efforts must be made to mitigate against it. We've seen it with horse armour,

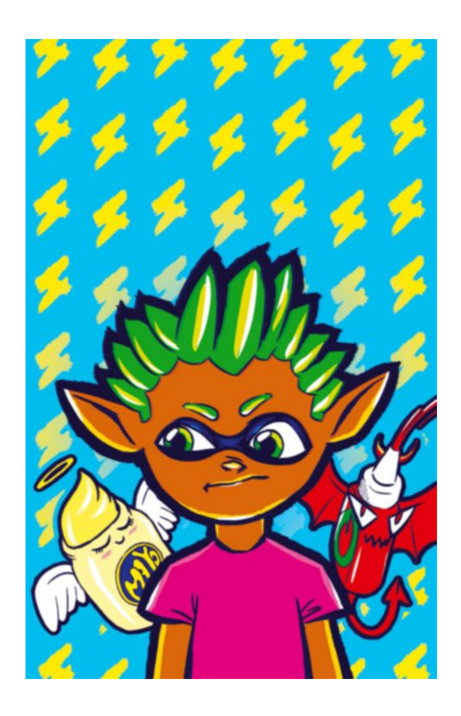


Illustration kaeru.com.ar

Making a game has never entailed so great a risk, so efforts must be made to mitigate against it

season and online passes, XP boosters and treasure maps. Now it's loot's turn.

Warners' implementation of the loot box, however, is to have it contain gameplay advantages. I accept that is a different matter, and seems grubby. Yet if you listen to certain corners of the internet, it is the death of all videogames. In the endless wars of so-styled 'pro-consumer' videogame reporting – as if everyone that doesn't automatically reach for their End Is Nigh A-board at times like these is somehow anti-consumer – there is no room for nuance. It's inconvenient; it muddles the message.

Yet there is plenty of middle ground here; this is no binary choice. For one, Warners has said that those who refuse to pay up will still get loot boxes: they are bought using a premium currency that can be earned while you play the game. This is standard practice in free-to-play games, as you no doubt know. And I agree that its implementation in a paid-for game seems a little off. But how generous is it? How dramatic are the benefits that the loot itself affords? And what, really, is the purpose of gaining a gameplay advantage in a singleplayer game that you paid good money for? How many are really going to pay – and what makes you think Warner is dumb enough to design a game so that you have no choice but to do so?

The daft thing in all of this is that Warners has recent form in putting a loot system in a paid-for game. *Injustice 2* has a premium currency, and it's just part of a bafflingly complex series of economies that I never came close to understanding during my time with the game. But its loot system, as a non-IAP player, was incredibly generous, to the point of overkill. And ultimately it was pretty useless: I'd honestly have preferred an *Overwatch*-style cosmetic gear system to the meagre boosts of a percentage point here or there to a near-invisible power stat. We can only judge a company on its actions and its form. In Warners' case, the latter gives me reason to look kindly upon the former.

But then, I don't make YouTube videos. And when I have questions about a developer or publisher's decision, I ask them before I put words on a page. Yet in the attention economy it is much easier to simply steam in, to decry something as the worst thing ever without stopping to think about the things that might undermine their argument, or bring them to a more nuanced position. That, dear reader, is why someone thinks only of a bacon sandwich, and mindlessly picks ketchup. Heresy, I'm sure you'll agree.

Nathan Brown is **Edge***'s editor, You know those guys gave Mario Kart: Double Dash a 5? Scum. Sub-human scum*



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#311

H Y P E

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Hype content

A pirate's life

Those of you who've spent time with a toddler of late will know that the pirate fantasy is a powerful one, that hits early. Who wouldn't want to wear a daft hat and an eye patch, sailing the seven seas, hunting for treasure and making land-lubbers walk the plank? As a boys' own tale it is right up there with superheroes, soldiers and so on, a vital step as we learn about goodies, baddies and the thrill of making mischief.

Yet while the shelves of your local videogame retailer are full of tales of warring superpowers – in both senses of the word – the pirate's life is only rarely explored. There was *Monkey Island*. There was *Sid Meier's Pirates!*, and *Galleon*. And there was, um, well… not much else. Until now, anyway: it seems games about piracy are like buses, if buses went on water, and were full of potential murderers in search of a quick thrill, and let you throw up in a bucket before tipping it over someone. A North London night bus in a rainstorm, perhaps.

It is no doubt a coincidence that both Ubisoft and Microsoft are simultaneously readying pirate-powered videogames for prime time. But both *Skull & Bones* (p38) and *Sea Of Thieves* (p34) come at the concept from starkly different directions. Ubisoft's game is, at least in multiplayer, a game about competition; of seeing who is the strongest, or smartest. Rare's title, by contrast, is about the camaraderie inherent in a group of friends sailing the high seas in search of adventure and the occasional scuffle, as much about the journey as the goal.

In other words, like the superhero or super-soldier, it's as flexible a fantasy when running on silicon as it is when acted out on the playground. Yet both *Sea Of Thieves* and *Skull & Bones* benefit from the rarity of their central theme; from the fact that, for whatever reason, pirates and games don't often mix. On this evidence, perhaps they should do it more often.

MOST WANTED

Call Of Duty: WWII
PC, PS4, Xbox One
The multiplayer beta may have raised more concerns than it allayed, but these days we see *COD* as an annual, six-hour, singleplayer rollercoaster of war, and given Sledgehammer's campaign track record, we remain cautiously optimistic.

The Crew 2 PC, PS4, Xbox One
Our Gamescom hands-on may have been identical to our E3 one, but it only served to reinforce our anticipation for a very different kind of driving game. Cars, boats and planes, switchable in near-realtime across an open-world US? Irresistible stuff.

Yakuza 6 PS4
With our playthrough of the Japanese *Yakuza 6* abandoned after the language barrier became too much, our attention turns to the western release. Not least for its uncommonly alluring special edition, which includes whiskey glasses, coasters, and Heat-branded ice blocks. Cor.



SEA OF THIEVES

Friendly, fair and forward-thinking: Rare's co-op adventure gives pirates a good name

Developer Rare
Publisher Microsoft Studios
Format PC, Xbox One
Origin UK
Release 2018

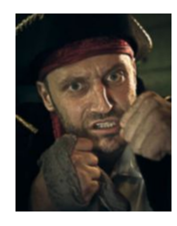
Hop aboard, chug some grog, adjust the sails and check the map: having blundered merrily through previous demos, we've grown quite accustomed to pirate life in Rare's cooperative adventure. So have a quarter of a million alpha testers. Indeed, it is already something of a sensation several months ahead of its full release, thanks to its accessible, and frequently funny, swashbuckling action. Considered design makes teamwork a requirement in the face of mild peril, with camaraderie a pleasant side-effect. Perhaps it's hard to go too wrong with a game that assembles a group of four firm friends on a quest to find some treasure. But this time, our demo presents a true test of *Sea Of Thieves'* multiplayer chops: we're playing with strangers – and strangers who speak a different language, at that.

We're almost positive it's not going to work. So much of the fun we've had previously has been reliant on team chemistry and familiarity. But we find ourselves quickly striking up a wordless conversation with our new crewmates. One person shows a particular map to the others, suggesting a trip to Snake Island. We, meanwhile, manage to call attention to the crucial map room below deck by hopping up and down and pumping away on our accordion so they can follow the music. It feels like just the right mix of useful tools and improvisational play. Rare has worked hard to achieve it, removing barriers that might discourage people from picking up a multiplayer game, even one with so alluring a fantasy as this.

"Some players don't want to use voice chat and identify themselves to other players," executive producer **Joe Neate** tells us. "They may be worried they'll get harassed. They might have a speech or hearing impediment." A non-verbal communication system of localised phrases will be implemented fairly soon, we're told. So will smaller, speedier two-man ships, the drawback of which is being more vulnerable to the firepower of bigger crews. But communication is the core of the game, and part of the fun is giving players a bit of room to get creative with it: Neate tells us he's seen players taking out their blunderbusses to point with, for instance.

Building a community from that player interaction is another key part of keeping players engaged and challenged, which is why Rare is already testing the waters with the game's growing online following. This year's E3 and Gamescom saw the studio post ARG campaigns to Internet forums. They hinted at hidden in-game loot in tricky riddles. "We thought the E3 one was really difficult," says senior designer Shelley Preston. "The community solved it in half an hour."

Fans duly requested that the Gamescom campaign be a little tougher. A special map ▶



Executive producer Joe Neate





ABOVE **Whoever's sailing the ship won't have access to the map: it's deliberately situated in the hull so that crew members have to work together to navigate.**
LEFT **A dynamic storm system means even short journeys can be made distastrous by wayward weather. Wind will affect the direction of rain, and flooding or damage to your vessel can sink those who sail unprepared**

ABOVE **Swords, pistols and cannons can make short work of enemy crews. But Rare wants to encourage friendly interaction too, and duly plans to change the red appearance of unknown player's gamertags to a more neutral white.**
RIGHT **Rare is being coy about the possibility of dedicated social spaces in the world, seeing ships as the game's meeting areas**





of the game's archipelago-studded world suggested eight tiny skulls that, when found and decoded in a certain way, ended up pointing to buried treasure. No help or explanation was given whatsoever. The victorious crew cracked it in a day, with a custom *Sea Of Thieves* Xbox One S the real-life spoils. While the experiment sparked real excitement and inspiration in devs and players alike, it also prompted the devs to stop and think whether the game's approach to piracy was, well, fair. Introduce a product of real-world value into a system where stealing is permitted – you can filch other crew's chests and cash them in at an outpost for the rewards – and it's soon all too clear where frustrations might infringe upon fun. "We were like, 'Should they have to turn in the Chest Of Sorrows once they've found it?'", Neate recalls. "No, because what if somebody steals it from them before they can? That's like stealing an Xbox!"

Balancing the risk/reward element, the team realised, was essential. "Your progress in any session of *Sea Of Thieves* is always at risk," Neate says. "But we felt that that was really cool, so we put it in the alpha, and we got telemetry for the amount of chests that are stolen, as opposed to found. Only about five per cent of chests were actually stolen. We're satisfying players who like to go out and prey on others, but it's not too frequent, because we've made it hard to do."

Indeed, you'll have to sneak or fire yourself, via cannon, aboard other ships to plunder a chest. Then there's actually finding where they've put it. Teamwork is essential, given you can't defend yourself from angry enemies when you're carrying your swag. They might not even have any to take. We wonder how long it'll be before crafty crews will abuse the proximity voice-chat system to set traps with boasts of fake loot.

Rare is inching ever closer to revealing exactly what that booty will be, and why we'll be so compelled to read maps and solve riddles in pursuit of it. "It's perfectly suited to *Sea Of Thieves*, and also to a game that is a service," says Neate. "It's not going to be something you just get to the end of after 100 hours and think, 'What do I do now?'" Whether you're out to pillage and plunder, chart the seven seas as an explorer, or simply tool around with a gang of pals, there will be rewards. It's being worked on at the studio, but hasn't been switched on in the alpha just yet. Neate, however, believes it is the game's secret sauce.



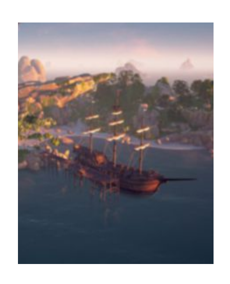
The question, naturally, is: why not do it now? With *Crackdown 3* delayed to next year, a new Xbox One launching this winter and a seemingly fully functional feel-good multiplayer title being regularly played by a quarter of a million people, we're keen to know what's stopping Rare from releasing the game now, if only in Game Preview.

Plenty, as it turns out. A game-experience team is still dreaming up fun new details – drunkenly vomiting into water buckets and chucking it at friends is one recent addition – and implementing more communication tools. An AI team is reworking enemy behaviours: previously, skeletons were bony Terminators, marching endlessly towards you until they died. Now, they'll back off and eat bananas when low on health, just like players do.

Drunkenly vomiting into water buckets and chucking it at friends is a recent addition

"There will be other threats in the world that we want to have for players," Neate says. "There's a very cool one that the team's prototyping and working on at the moment." The studio is also developing new kinds of quests that reward different play styles. And, of course, there's progression, which is the least developed aspect of the game in its current state. "Players have high expectations. There's more to do to bring it into a coherent whole that a broader audience will expect when they buy into a game.

"On a normal game, we'd be looking at the date and worrying, thinking we should fix the mountain of bugs," Neate says. "But we're investing a ton of time in our culture and our technology to make a game that will keep growing. There's a gap in the market for this kind of silly, social game. We believe that this game is going to take off because of that watchable, shareable nature. It's just funny." As we demonstratively fire ourselves out of a cannon to shrieks of surprised laughter from our new French friends, we're inclined to agree. ■



Aye patch

The developers know that *Sea Of Thieves*' best moments are borne of players being given enough leeway to try out harebrained ideas. Producer Joe Neate recalls a player banging his shovel on the floor percussively during an impromptu pirate jam session. "Joe brought it back to Rare, and now we're all doing it," senior designer Shelley Preston adds. Another staffer discovered that a heavy sword swing from atop a crow's nest applied extra momentum for a superpowered high-dive. Rare is reluctant to patch those kinds of fun glitches out of the game, as long as they don't break anything – though the heavy melee-jump has been removed during human cannonballing to prevent never-ending flights across the map. Standing on sharks and surfing them around had to go, too: "It was too jittery," says Neate.



SKULL & BONES

Ubisoft Singapore breaks away for the high seas

Developer Ubisoft Singapore
Publisher Ubisoft
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin Singapore
Release 2018

While it's one thing to coat a vehicle combat game in pirate paint, it's another to encourage interactions between players that evoke that fantasy on the fly, or to use the theme to suggest strategies with real competitive applications. *Skull & Bones'* strength isn't that it's a multiplayer pirate ship battle simulator; it's that it could *only* be a multiplayer pirate ship battle simulator.

The fundamentals will be familiar to anybody who played *Assassin's Creed III*, *Black Flag* or *Rogue* – Ubisoft Singapore was responsible for the naval-combat sections in those games, and that expertise translates directly here. "What I saw was strong fundamental gameplay that addressed the fantasy of naval power and combat," creative director **Justin Farren**, who joined Ubisoft Singapore as a closing producer on *Black Flag*, tells us. "The linear sequences in *ACIII* really leant themselves to something bigger."

Huge age-of-sail warships are controlled from over the captain's shoulder, with steering on the left stick and the camera on the right. Weapon selection is a matter of looking in a particular direction – lining up broadsides against opponents to the port or starboard, or firing deck guns and special weapons from the stern or bow. Speed is determined by furling (and unfurling) your sails in increments, which are influenced by the direction and speed of the wind. The boxed-off sections of the Indian ocean used for structured multiplayer have fixed wind patterns, and learning to take advantage of these is as important as learning the physical layout of each area.

There's much more variety in ship types than in the *Assassin's Creed* games where these mechanics made their debut. The difference between a frigate and a sloop is pronounced, both in how they handle and how much of a beating they can take. Broadly speaking, the ship archetypes fill in for character classes; there are tanks, snipers and close-range brawlers, although the nature of naval warfare changes the way these roles feel (as it should).

"We looked at traditional RPG archetypes that people would understand – they know what a tank is, what a healer is, what DPS is – and asked if this would make sense in our world," Farren says. "What we found is that there were lots of ships that had similar roles, and that pirates were very adaptable and adaptive in how they'd modify their ships to be more effective predators."

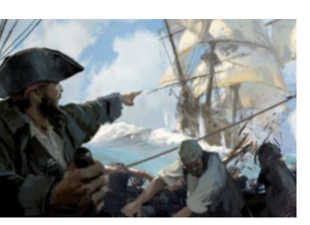
These are large, slow war machines encountering each other over a relatively flat ocean with little in the way of cover – save for other ships. Coordinating with your allies to effectively trap opponents, line up deadly shots, and protect vulnerable craft takes communication, skill, and good reading of the wind. There's a high skill ceiling here, which ▶



Justin Farren, creative director


Skull & Bones has its origins as a one-on-one multiplayer adaptation of 2013's *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*





Context-sensitive barks and animated crew members serve to draw your attention to key events in multiplayer

bodes well for *Skull & Bones'* competitive future and is quite the evolution for a set of systems that began life as a singleplayer bolt-on. They translate well to multiplayer, Farren argues, because of the simulation at their core: "Our game is entirely physics based: everything from the ocean to the cannonballs. Being able to read that stuff, in realtime, in a shared space with other players – you're going to have to be really in tune with it."

In Loot Hunt mode, two teams of pirates converge on a convoy of AI-controlled merchant ships. Destroying them yields, as you might have guessed, loot, which is held in the cargo hold of the player who collects it. Sunken players drop a portion of their haul when they die, but can respawn to attempt to reclaim it – up to a certain point. In the endgame of a match, powerful AI pirate hunters arrive and begin indiscriminately attacking both teams, who must race to a shared escape zone, no longer able to respawn if they die. The winning team is the one that extracts the most loot; no matter how many merchant ships a team raids, the only thing that counts is who escapes.

> *"We can't set out to make ourselves an esport, but we can make it competitive"*



How a team solves that strategic problem is laudably open-ended. In our demo, a rather one-sided first game ends in ignominious defeat as our opponent commits four ships to open combat while a fifth, a heavily armoured frigate, focuses on raiding the merchant convoy. Although we hold our own in battle, we're unable to catch the frigate before it can escape with an absolutely vast amount of gold – far more than we could muster even if we'd all made it out, which we haven't. This 'four protect one' strategy, if you'll forgive us some MOBA parlance, is devastatingly effective.

It has its weaknesses, however. Our opponent attempts the same strategy in the second match and, early on, it yields similar results, the pirate hunters arriving with another frigate heavily loaded with gold. This time, however, our team has been communicating more effectively, and we've switched to a fast, but lightly armoured sloop. Using our new craft's long-ranged cannons and mortar, we're able to strip the armour from the frigate's port side – enough to sweep in close at full sail and begin a boarding action. Unlike the *Assassin's Creed* games' naval combat, there's no direct hand-to-hand combat in *Skull & Bones*. Boarding is more like a finishing move on a vulnerable opponent, playing out as a short cutscene. Crucially, though, doing it doesn't just destroy your enemy. It steals their gold, too.

Suddenly, that ultra-valuable frigate is exposed as a huge strategic liability, and our sloop has become the most valuable ship in the area. Knowing that they can't win unless they take us down, the remaining enemy ships come about in an attempt to block our exit. Spying an opportunity, a teammate in a frigate pulls ahead and positions the bulk of their ship between our sloop and the enemy team, physically blocking the first round of cannon fire. They then turn hard into the enemy line, colliding with the lead ship and tangling the others for long enough for us to escape and win the game for our team. It's a punch-the-air moment, the kind of against-all-odds victory that the best team-multiplayer games make space for. Crucially, it stems from the strategic decisions made by both teams, rather than random chance. Had our opponents chosen to spread the treasure between all of their ships, the scenario would have played out very differently.

"We wanted to give players an opportunity to have comebacks," Farren says. "We wanted players to feel that if they worked together at the beginning they could set the tone of the match, but if they were unsuccessful they had a way to come back. We can't set out to make ourselves an esport, but we can make good decisions to make it competitive."

Ubisoft Singapore isn't talking too much about *Skull & Bones'* broader structure, which will extend the principles of competitive matches to much bigger and more freeform hunting grounds. Loot Hunt, however, is designed to be a microcosm of the open-world half of the game. "The mode reflects the model of the world," Farren says, "which is that pirates want loot, so they go to a trade route, and when they get there there's not enough loot so they fight. That's the way the world works." ■



Kraken it open

Given Ubisoft's famous love of franchises, it's surprising that *Skull & Bones* is being billed as a new IP. Ubisoft Singapore's reasoning is that a new setting gives the studio the opportunity to introduce ideas that don't have a place in *Assassin's Creed* – particularly the mythological creatures, sighted at the end of the game's reveal trailer, whose role in *Skull & Bones* is yet to be revealed. The game's relatively realistic presentation is offset against the notion that the superstitions of contemporary sailors were based on fact: that there really were kraken waiting to beset isolated ships. Freedom from the *AC* licence has also given the Singapore team space to reimagine specific characters. A Blackbeard-esque figure appears among the lineup of the game's initial pirate lords, the AI antagonists of the open-world game.



TOP **A long button press lets you view the ocean from the crow's nest and tag ships for the benefit of your allies.** MAIN **Weather and waves impact the effectiveness of your cannons, so timing broadsides carefully is crucial**

TOP **Successful pursuit entails using chain shot and other weapons to damage sails and slow opponents down.** MIDDLE **The wind and water effects are notably improved from *Black Flag*: it's possible to tell the direction and strength of the wind with the UI completely disabled.** ABOVE **Islands offer cover, but can also render you blind to enemy movement and reduce your ability to help out your allies.** LEFT **Certain ships are better at ramming and boarding than others, but smashing boats together is always an option that favours players best able to read the wind**





THE EVIL WITHIN II

Shinji Mikami passes the torch in this chilling horror sequel

Developer	Bethesda Softworks
Publisher	Tango Gameworks
Format	PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin	Japan
Release	October 13

Sebastian was by turns wooden and campy in the first game: this time, his inner struggles and realistic reactions make him more relatable ▶





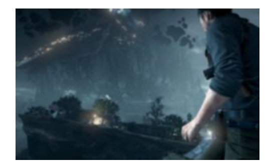


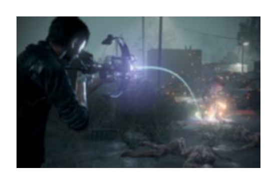
Shinji Mikami still has a soft spot for his opus, it seems. The director's spiritual follow-up to the seminal *Resident Evil 4*, survival horror shooter *The Evil Within*, was riddled with *Resi* reference points, what with its murderous villagers, puzzle mansions and chainsaw-toting horrorshows. It did just enough to stand on its own, however. And considering a Mikami-less Capcom was struggling to make Resi matter in his absence, all was well. In a post-*Resi VII* world, however, *The Evil Within II* must work even harder to step out from the shadows of its creator's finest work.

Our time with its sequel shows that it's not afraid to keep inviting comparison, if a grisly force-feeding scene at a dinner table early on is anything to go by. It's when we step into the quasi-open world that we realise Tango Gameworks has lost none of its penchant for bold choices. Sure, it's no longer enforcing the cinematic black bars of the 2.35:1 aspect ratio that proved so divisive in the original game, and has made standardised shooter controls default – but non-linear progression is quite the change for a horror title. Detective Sebastian Castellanos' quest to rescue daughter Lily from the depths of the Stem (a virtual 'mind palace') isn't just a sprint through scenarios of increasing nastiness. Charting a path through Union is left up to the player. It's a bold move, even a strange one: horror games, after all, are typically strictly directed, since pacing – breaking up the scares with downtime – is of vital importance.

"Some people see that as a negative; we see it as a positive because the original game didn't have it," game director **John Johanas** explains. "Even though it's downtime, it's not that you're completely risk free – it just allows the pacing to change in what we feel is a good way. There's an ebb and flow, of going to these linear areas and having these crafted horror experiences, and then sort of freeform exploration, with that little bit of risk attached. The way people play, they're going to get a different experience each time."

Johanas' rise to the director's chair – Mikami is now producer on the project – may have something to do with this stark shift in structure. Johanas headed up two of the first game's DLC packages, which were notable for their heavy stealth focus. Moving between safe houses here is a tense crawl through a thick fog of dread, Castellanos clutching a pistol with terrified certainty that it's about to fly away. The idea, it transpires, is not to enforce stealth like the first game's DLC, but to empower it in areas the base game didn't.





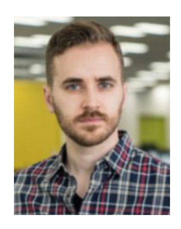
ABOVE **The theoretical Stem world justifies some very surreal set-dressing.** LEFT **Occasional scenes echo the tense, linear corridor chases of the first game**

Nightmare AI foes can take five or six precious bullets to put down. Some situations call for a tactical retreat





In case Sebastian wasn't in enough trouble, he's also being stalked by insane photographer Stefano and his tripod monster, Obscura





John Johanas, game director, and Shinji Mikami, producer

"[The DLC] wasn't survival horror; it was just horror. You had no weapons and no way to defend yourself," Johanas says. "In the first game there were areas where stealth wasn't viable, and we wanted to make it as viable as possible in the sequel. There are almost no forced stealth elements; it's optional."

Though the map is small, crossing it feels like a Herculean task. It's partially due to the fact that we're playing on Nightmare difficulty, meaning hyper-alert monsters soak up our limited ammo and kill us in two hits. But it's also because we spend so much time agonising between rocks and hard places. Tuning the radio to directional static with a face button reveals various opportunities: there's the trail of the main narrative to follow, of course, but also downed Mobius operators to seek out in exchange for intel or new weapons. Heading up to a roof, for example, yields a broken sniper rifle and mention of a replacement barrel in the north-west. Monsters stagger and swarm around these spots, predictably, and decisions must be made: go after Lily fuelled by crafted medical syringes, or burn precious resources to nab the Warden Crossbow first?

In theory, there are multiple approaches to the jeep it sits in. In reality, there's a carefully constructed line of cover leading to it, and other paths lead to failure: we're chased out of bushes when the indistinct range of camouflage mode sabotages us, and an attempt to lob bottles at enemies from atop a truck is thwarted when the monsters climb up to join us. It's disappointing, but we're under-equipped this early on – had we gone to fix the sniper rifle first, life might have been simpler. Once we grab our prize, a shock bolt into a puddle makes swift work of enemies: *The Evil Within II* will, clearly, be a game of managing efficiency and creativity in the absence of a generous arsenal.

Headshots still splatter with aplomb – when a concerning amount of framerate stutter isn't throwing off our aim, that is – and reanimated nightmares still scramble out of dark holes to slash at us, testing a kinder autosave. The demo opens with Sebastian being chased by a ghoulish lady brandishing a buzzsaw. There are plenty of *Resi*-esque parts still rattling around, but from what we've seen they're used to punctuate a more flexible, unscripted take on horror, in which plenty of the worst things that happen to you are probably your own damn fault. Johanas may be director, and it may have resulted in a different take on Mikami's brand of action horror, but *The Evil Within II* still bears its creator's signature – to the point that we can't help but wonder how involved he still is.

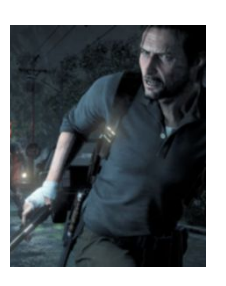
> ***"The way people play, they're going to get a different experience each time"***

"Well, we always talk," Mikami says. "I give him specific propositions, or advice on things I think could be done this way or that. He doesn't necessarily follow my advice, though."

Johanas adds: "In the first game, you'd make something, show it to him, then adjust it based on feedback. For the DLCs we were given the freedom to play, to take it in our own direction, and this is sort of an adapted version of that. It depends on the issue: sometimes it's something I really want to do, and other times [Mikami] is, like, 'John, you've *got* to do this'. This collaborative approach is challenging, but it isn't as exhausting as you'd think. It's fun. When you have differing opinions, you can create something that's even better." ■



Despite the appearance of these fiery things, matches are no longer needed to destroy monsters: a swift curb stomp suffices instead



Field of view

The original game's 2.35:1 aspect ratio was divisive, certainly, but it was also part of the game's identity. While Johanas and team initially planned to remove it from the sequel entirely, it is now optional, unlocked once you complete the game. "We put the black bars back in to a demo as a joke for a presentation we were doing for Bethesda. And we were like, 'Ahh, this looks really good, let's put it in.' So we did, but hid it away. We're very fond of it, but we know there were people who didn't like their screen space being taken away like that. But some shots just look a lot better with black bars."



H Y P E

CUPHEAD

Seven years later, is Studio MDHR's cartoon run-and-gun a winning blend?

Developer	Studio MDHR
Publisher	Microsoft
Format	PC, Xbox One
Origin	Canada
Release	29 September







Expect to die often: you're not given much margin for error. Playing in co-op offers some second chances, as a pal can parry-slap your ghost to revive you

This one has been brewing for a while. Back in 2010, brothers Chad and Jared Moldenhauer started work on *Cuphead*. It was to be a run-and-gun, boss-rush game inspired by *Contra* and *Mega Man*, presented in the surreal aesthetic of 1930s animation. Microsoft snapped it up and announced it at E3 2014: the hype built rapidly, the inevitable forum feedback rolled in, and both *Cuphead* and its dev team have had to swell. A team of three is now 14. Eight boss fights have become 30. Platforming levels were added after players suggested boss fights weren't enough. More and more has been thrown into the pot, but we're not entirely sure the resulting concoction is any stronger for it.

Our latest demo is a collection of stages seen before at a string of E3s: concerning, given release is just weeks away. But if the jazz-infused bouncing and shooting of its levels are making second or third impressions,

The exaggerated cartoon absurdity magnifies every little success and failure

the art might as well be making its first all over again. It is still as delightful as when we first clapped eyes on it. The manic grins of flying acorn foes; a frog boss in boxing gloves contorting into a malevolent rotary fan – every frame is sumptuously hand-drawn and inked, folding into expressive animations that keep difficult and dizzying onslaughts readable. Enemies explode into gratifying puffs of blue and orange confetti, and when our hero takes a hit to his limited and non-regenerating health, the panic in his sudden jumping-jack is palpable. *Cuphead*'s presentation isn't just a matter of style: in a twitch-based game, good visual feedback is the difference between fun and frustration. The exaggerated cartoon absurdity magnifies and clarifies every little success and failure. Well, most of the time – a couple of more-than-close scrapes that leave us unscathed suggest hitboxes aren't as consistent as they might be. Mostly, the actual acts of hopping, shooting, air-dashing and parrying pink-coloured attacks with an almighty thwack feel fine. Switching between long-range fire and a slightly shorter-range spread shot, we soon fall into a rhythm.

Yet rhythm, perhaps, is *Cuphead*'s problem. In one boss fight, against The Root Gang, an angry, anthropomorphic potato spitting clods of dirt at us is a sight to behold – but simple hops over the repeated patterns of his attacks are all we need. His weepy onion friend in the second phase of the fight is even more of a non-issue: we nudge the stick left and right in the same spot to avoid the falling tears until our bullets do their work. There's a nagging sense that we're not doing it quite right. Should we be jumping more? For most of the fight we are motionless, simply holding the fire button. Should we be switching between guns? The difference between the two types of weapons in such a small space feels negligible.

Then again, this is a game heavily inspired by the Moldenhauer brothers' childhood love of late '80s and '90s titles like *Contra* and *Mega Man*. Standing stationary and shooting down a boss' big invisible health bar certainly worked at times for those titles, but these days we like a little more dynamism in our death-dealing. Thankfully, the final wave of the fight, against a giant murderous carrot, delivers in spades (which is handy, really, when you think about it). Dodging projectiles and hypno-rays requires precision and timing, and our abilities finally feel useful and flexible. Ducks and dashes are critical, and spread-shot fire clears projectiles quickly before it's back to a long-range assault on our main target. The section is even more frantic and claustrophobic in the local co-op mode.

We come away with a renewed hope for similar dynamism in later fights, not least because battles are randomised to encourage repeated play. Sadly, the platforming levels betray themselves as the afterthought they so clearly were. It seems *Cuphead*'s lengthy development time, and its maker's eagerness to provide players – and perhaps, Microsoft – with plenty of content has stretched a small, straightforward, yet focused idea into something much broader, and possibly to its detriment. The essential rush of the boss rush remains: the question is whether *Cuphead*'s final, seemingly diluted recipe can satisfy until the very last drop. ■



Risk runners

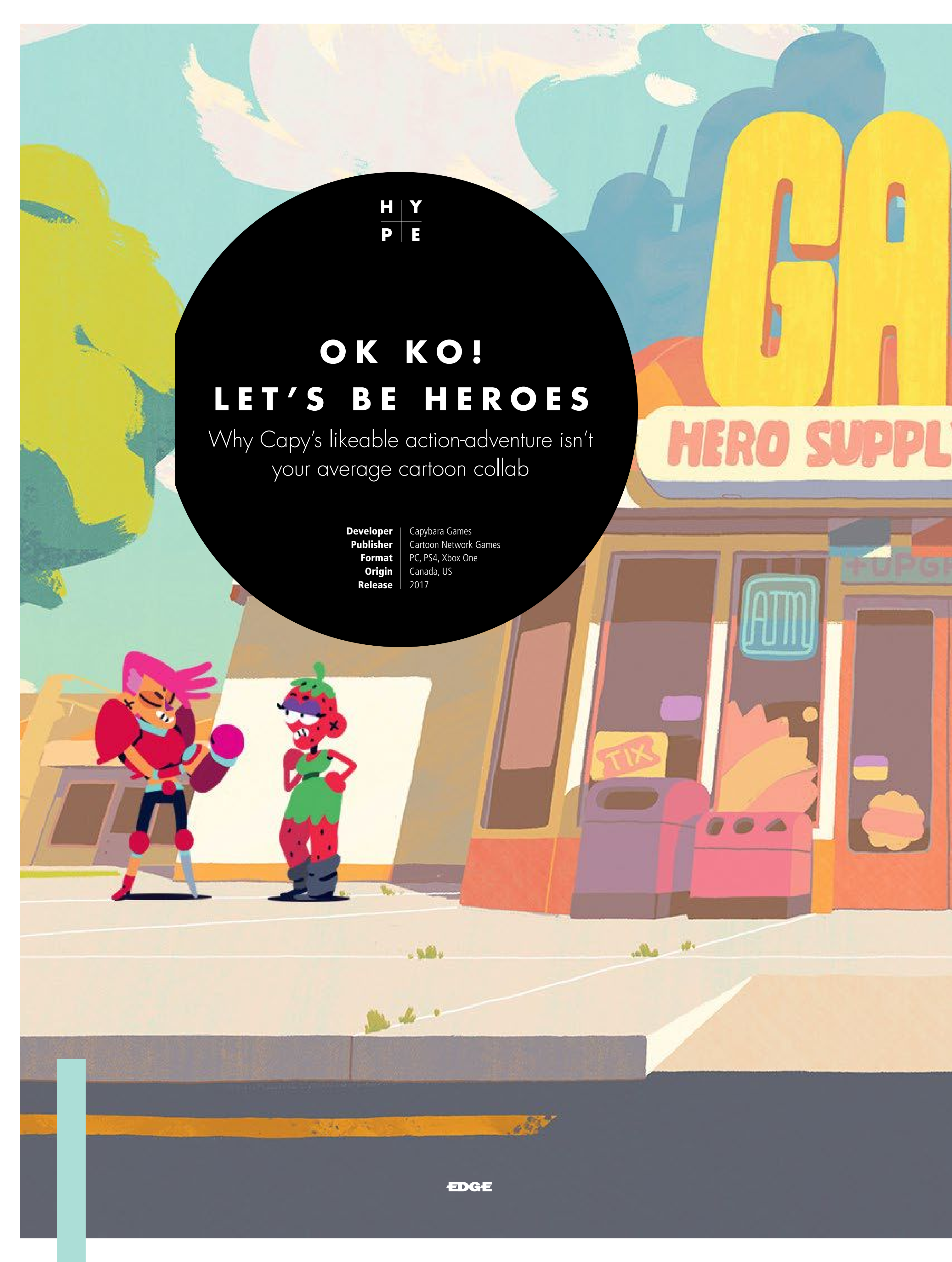
Although it's gradually grown larger over time, a team of 14 is still on the small side. "We do all wear multiple hats," says Maja Moldenhauer, producer and inking artist. "We don't have a timestamp on how long it takes to nail down a boss concept, or even a regular enemy, and that has contributed to some of the delays. We always want to remain true to our vision and never compromise that, even in the interest of time. If it took ten iterations, we did ten iterations." Creating the time and space it took to develop *Cuphead* into a much larger game than originally planned has required a great deal of commitment, and not just in terms of time: both of the Moldenhauer brothers have remortgaged their homes in order to get *Cuphead*, finally, over the line.



Maja Moldenhauer, producer and inking artist



ABOVE **In keeping with its retro inspirations, *Cuphead* doesn't show boss health bars by default. The final game, however, will allow players to turn them on. True masochists can also try a third difficulty setting upon completing the game.** LEFT **Some stages require you to get especially creative by limiting your movement options. Ranged shots are crucial here, and equipping the homing missile gun can take care of flying mobs at the expense of firing rate**



OK KO! LET'S BE HEROES

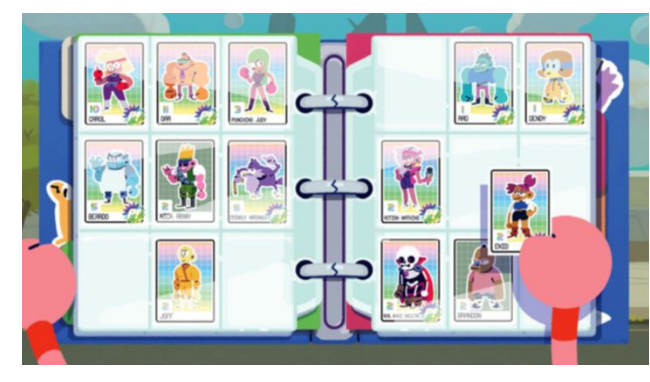
Why Capy's likeable action-adventure isn't your average cartoon collab

Developer Capybara Games
Publisher Cartoon Network Games
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin Canada, US
Release 2017



The characters will be familiar to anyone who knows the show, though the art style is a little different. "The creators are open to us playing within that space," Jeff Riggall says







ABOVE **The controls may be simple, but this is anything but a mindless button-masher. Attack patterns must be learned and threats prioritised if you're to avoid being hit.**
TOP RIGHT **The show's relatively small cast means minor characters will be fleshed out in the game. Each will have their own collectible POW card. Capy's hoping to have 25 in all.**
MAIN **Dialogue exchanges are fast-paced and witty. You might recognise a few voices, since the show's cast is full of actors who have worked in games previously.**
BELOW LEFT **Buying new cards from the vending machine is a delightfully tactile process – you'll stretch KO's long arm to slide coins into the slot, reach down to retrieve your prize and then rip open the pack with a flourish.**
BELOW RIGHT **Laid-back and sarcastic, co-worker Enid is the ideal counterpoint to KO's tireless exuberance**







OK KO! LET'S BE HEROES



Jeff Riggall, Cartoon Network's director of game production

This may not, we concede, be the kind of game we ordinarily cover. But then *OK KO* is no ordinary tie-in. As Cartoon Network Games producer **Jeff Riggall** is keen to remind us, this isn't technically a licensed game, since the network's interactive arm is publishing it. And that's not all: the show to which it's connected – which began its run on Cartoon Network in August – has been in production at the same time as the game, and inspiration has been a two-way street. Developer Capybara Games has been brought into the creative process of the series. "We're bouncing ideas off each other, so elements within the game may well funnel back into the show," Riggall tells us.

It's Capy's involvement that first piqued our interest, of course, and Riggall acknowledges that the studio's industry cachet is a big part of the reason why it first approached the Toronto outfit. "We were looking for a strong partner – not just from a creative point of view or being able to get a project done, but also someone that has a strong following," he says. "Why do they have this fanbase? Because they're really good at what they do, and we wanted to pull that in as well. Hopefully that indie space they have a stronghold in can come over."

Inevitably, the game hews a little younger than Capy's usual output. The show's target audience is six-to-eleven-year-olds, though the tone suggests this is one of those cartoons that, like a Steven Universe or Adventure Time, will also appeal to adults. It's set in and around a bodega that sells equipment for superheroes, where protagonist KO is working a summer job, and the game quickly settles into an episodic rhythm. KO arrives at work, talks to friends and colleagues and completes quests before his shift finishes and his mother comes to take him home.

These quests tend to involve Boxmore, the rival store across the street that supplies supervillains. As a group of robots is launched into the plaza, the game transforms into a single-screen brawler. The action that follows is straightforward but satisfyingly responsive, a jump and attack button combining with stick directions to produce a range of moves. And you'll also be able to deploy cards, calling in allies to assist you. Musclebound store owner Mr Gar will dive in for a single, powerful blow; a friendly goblin named Beardo will drive across the screen in a burrito truck, briefly grounding any enemies he runs into. Naturally, you'll need to wait until their individual timers reset before they can be used again.

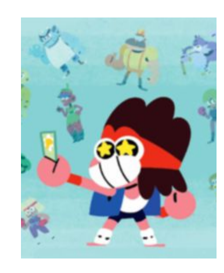


Before you can use these cards, however, you'll need to build KO's friendships with the supporting cast. At an in-store vending machine you can spend coins to earn new cards, each corresponding to a different character, and once you've completed enough quests the card will level up, allowing you to use their abilities in combat. Players will be invited to experiment with different card pairings, and certain types of encounter will encourage you to shuffle the pack: for boss fights you might want to couple a defensive assistant with a healer, while an ally with an area-of-effect attack is better-suited to battles against groups of smaller enemies.

With more than 20 characters – some of whom will only show up on certain days – and unlockable abilities for KO, it's easy to see how these simple systems will develop over a full game. But if there are only fleeting hints of that in this demo build, it's already fizzing with character. The tone of dialogue responses is determined by selecting from three animated icons in KO's brain, while a combination of static camera angles and a scaling character model means exploration has the visual dynamism of a cartoon. The script is zippy, and there's an easygoing charm that extends to the lack of pressure applied on the player. Though the freedom it affords you only goes so far – it's technically an open world, but it's a very compact sandbox – you're allowed to bounce between questlines, returning to incomplete missions whenever you like.

> *"Elements within the game may well funnel back into the television show"*

It's tempting to attribute the game's zesty energy to Capy, but the show's production team has been unusually deeply involved throughout development. "This is one of our first self-published console titles, so we have a really high bar for quality that we want to hit," Riggall enthuses, clearly confident – and with good reason – that publisher and developer are likely to achieve that goal. ■

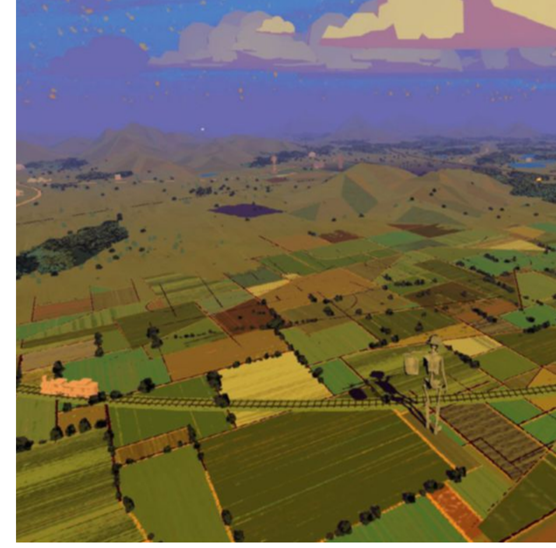


Network solutions

Cartoon Network has had an interest in games for some time now, although so far it has mainly focused on browser and mobile titles. "The mobile side is where we've been pushing heavily over the last few years to really get quality product out the door," he says, citing the Steven Universe RPG, *Attack The Light*, as the prime example of the company's determination to try new things. "We're not interested in repackaging something that someone else has released and just putting our brand on it." It helps in this instance that *OK KO*'s team knows its stuff: show creator Ian Jones-Quartey and director Toby Jones are both particularly game-savvy. "You can see that in the DNA of the show," he says. "It's got so many game elements intrinsic to it."

Developer Dim Bulb Games
Publisher Gambitious Digital Entertainment
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin US
Release 2018







WHERE THE WATER TASTES LIKE WINE

The next great American folktale is written in the cards

Our road trip across a huge, highway-stitched map of America is an unusual one, to say the least. We're a giant perambulatory skeleton, bindle slung over the shoulder, advancing across the southern stretch of the country with unhurried resolve. We do have one thing in common with our fleshier nomadic predecessors: we are in search of a good story. Not necessarily a true one, mind. This *is* America, after all.

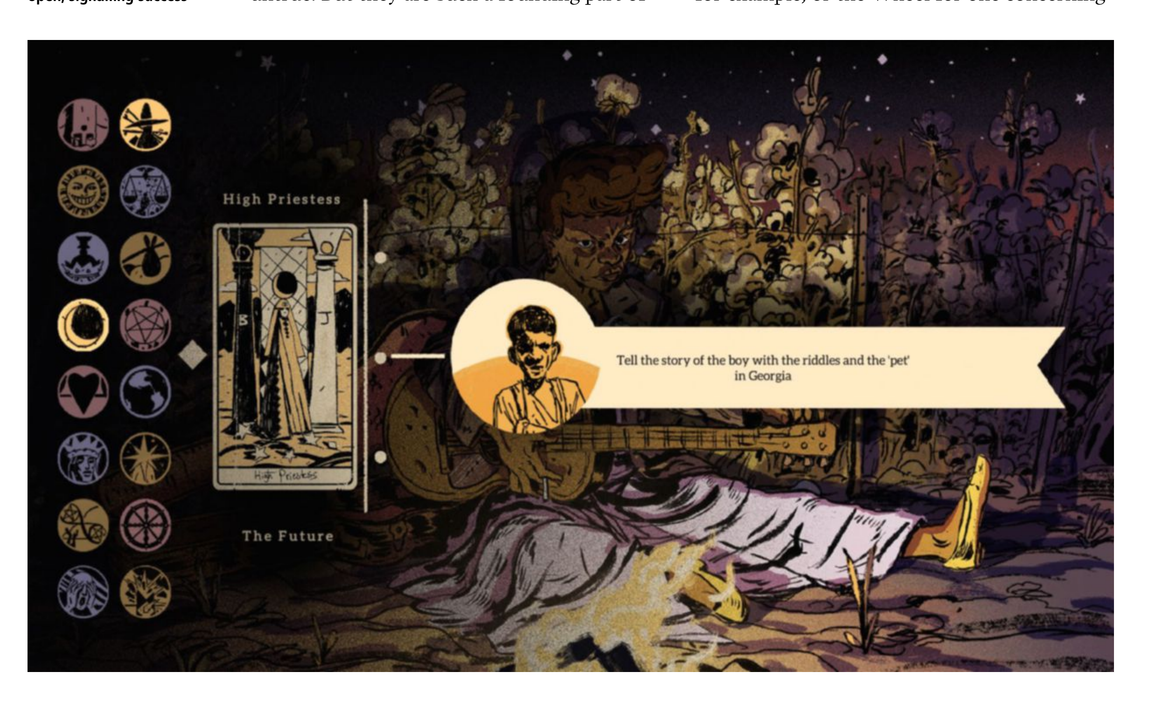
And what a fascinating protagonist for a videogame it is. "The United States has a mythology about itself," creator **Johnnemann Nordhagen** tells us. "We tell ourselves we're the greatest country in the world, we're the freest country in the world – we're the *only* free country in the world. All these various things that are just obviously, blatantly untrue. But they are such a founding part of what it means to be American, and what we tell ourselves about what it means to be American."

Hence, the sole programmer of seminal narrative adventure *Gone Home* decided his next project had to be about his homeland, and storytelling. There are still characters: 16 of them, each handled by a different writer. But there is no beginning, middle and end to the anthological narrative. Its tale of tales is not concerned with the what, but the *how*.

Naturally, the player is at the centre of it. In a twist of fate lifted straight from the whisky-soaked yearning of a blues singer, a run-in with the devil has cursed you. You wander the land as a soulless shell, spreading stories. They're collected in the form of tarot cards, which act as metaphorical reminders: the Fool for a tale that tickles the funnybone, for example, or the Wheel for one concerning



Johnnemann Nordhagen



Select a tarot card to tell a story that pleases a character, and a strange eye at the top of the screen will slowly open, signalling success





LEFT **The Dire Wolf is the devil you bet your soul against. He's quite a bit better at poker than the dogs in that painting**



TOP LEFT **The overworld is directly inspired by classic JRPGs like the *Final Fantasy* games, Nordhagen tells us: "It seemed like a good way to present travel across a vast landscape."**
ABOVE **A campfire indicates that one of the 16 main characters has settled here. Talking to them isn't the only way to gather stories: other points of interest trigger curious events**

fate and fortune. Meeting strangers – like Althea, who is tuning her guitar by the flickering light of the campfire – means you're prompted to spin a yarn fitting their emotional whims. When Althea requests a happy story, we produce the Fool: she responds warmly, opening up to us about her own life.

Our demo has our inventory pre-loaded, however, and so it feels like trial-and-error as we produce the same cards in response to the same questions. Farmer Franklin wants to hear a happy story, too, and a scary one. So does Quinn. We pick the same cards, but are sometimes caught off guard: the mysterious Quinn's definition of a spine-chilling story, for instance, is not the same as Franklin's. "It's tricky, because certain subject matters lend themselves to different kinds of stories," Nordhagen says. "So if you choose the Tower, about death and destruction, you might find a lot of scary or sad stories under that. But there are sometimes hopeful stories about death, sometimes even funny ones." It's reassuring that failing to produce the right one before the night's end isn't unduly punished: that particular character's chapter simply won't advance, and you'll have to pay attention to where they say they're headed next if you want to try again.

Each card is further coloured by the situations in which it's found. Perhaps you'll receive one from a strange travelling man, the vignette erring towards gently humorous as your conversation unfolds. "It would probably be about travel, but it's got this fun mood to it," says Nordhagen. "So it's about remembering the adventures you've had, which ones feel funny or scary, or other things. We organise it into the categories for the player, but you have to remember how they felt when you first encounter that story, and try and pick it out." And guessing 'right' every time isn't always necessarily the goal. "As a storyteller, to dig out their story, you have to dance around a little bit, and sometimes tell them something that you want [them] to know rather than something they have asked for."

"As a storyteller, to dig out their story, you have to dance around a little bit"

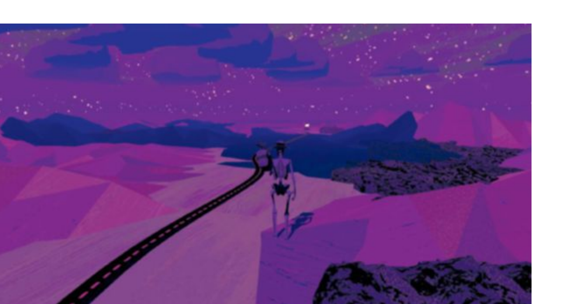
Storytelling is a complex, even morally dubious business, and *Where The Water Tastes Like Wine* looks poised to explore it with subtlety. "The idea that our truth is built up out of the stories that we tell ourselves and each other, and how that truth can change when we change the stories that we tell each other, is the important part," Nordhagen says. As we tuck away the tale of Louise Ames' violin, our character's thoughts encapsulate the something-from-nothing enterprise of the American Dream, a barbaric past spun legendary, and the era of 'fake news' all at once: 'You'll have to remember that, even if it's not true. It's a good story.' ■



Queer as folk

While most of the stories are original works, some are based on existing tales. Duncan Fyfe's contributions weave in his love of the paranormal, while Kevin Snow leans on his degree in southern American history. Expect to find a few traditional American folktales, too. "Having those in there helps really bring out the flavour of the United States," Nordhagen says. "If you're familiar with the story of the Headless Horseman or Paul Bunyan, and you see it emerge from this humble beginning, and then you tell that story and it grows larger and larger every time you hear it as a player in the game, then you can draw analogies from that and the other made-up stories you're encountering."

Your lengthy trek will eventually give rise to hunger. Left unchecked, you'll die, so putting storytelling on hold to occasionally find food is a sensible idea



Developer Arc System Works
Publisher Bandai Namco Entertainment
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin Japan
Release 2018







DRAGON BALL FIGHTERZ

Arc System Works' new fighting game is revealing its true power

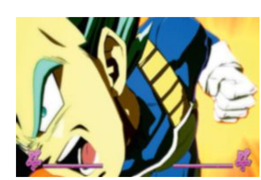
The popularity of Dragon Ball Z has led to countless translations, spin-off series, endless merchandise and some 17 movies. It's also inspired a glut of thoroughly average videogames, but Arc System Works' forthcoming fighting game has already suggested it's set to break that curse. Our latest session with this expertly presented game shows the dev team is not content with simply making a decent Dragon Ball tie-in: it's also confident enough to make one that pushes some boundaries.

It all stems from a desire to make Arc's famously complex brand of fighting games more accessible. Bringing the appeal of Dragon Ball and the technicality of the genre together is a challenge, producer **Tomoko Hiroki** admits. "It's not just about difficult controls or combos," she tells us. "It's about mind games and strategy, the combination of characters you choose and deciding when to use Z-assists [that tag in another character]. We want people to use *Dragon Ball FighterZ* as a way into the genre."

An obsessive amount of work has gone into recreating the anime in frame-perfect detail – something which Hiroki and team believe will incentivise casual Dragon Ball fans to master their characters. "Letting players move their favourite characters the way they move in the anime, and launch their iconic attacks, is one of the ways that we can make them want to train and become better." For dedicated fighting-game fans, winning has long been its own reward: for a Dragon Ball enthusiast, the act of becoming the hero with such astonishing fidelity could well be enough to spark real interest in virtual sparring.

Make no mistake: for all the game's





MIDDLE **Android 18 can attack from multiple angles using her twin, Android 17.** ABOVE **Certain situations or chosen teams will trigger special super animations**

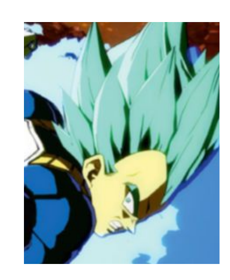
Blonde-haired Android 18 is mobile and aggressive, but deals fairly low damage





LEFT **Think of Android 16 as this game's Zangief – a slow, powerful grappler – though he can also blow himself up for an instant kill.** BELOW **Holding two adjacent face buttons will charge your Ki meter quickly, which you'll need to produce quick-firing projectiles or pull off certain special moves**







Tomoko Hiroki, producer

simplified quarter-circle motions and powerful universal abilities – teleports, guard-breakers and counterattack-denying super dashes are performed using the same inputs for every character – *Dragon Ball FighterZ* runs deeper. The faithfulness to the anime is more than fan service: it has sparked some surprising riffs on genre tradition. New roster addition Krillin can heal himself and teammates. One of his special attacks will occasionally see him throw out his fan-favourite Senzu Bean: it restores around a quarter of a health bar when picked up. Tag in a teammate – before an opponent snaps the bean up for themselves, preferably – and it can turn a match around. His other attacks are trickier to execute, and significantly weaker. "We made Krillin into a character like that for balance, both in terms of a Dragon Ball game and a fighting game," says Hiroki. "In the anime, Krillin doesn't fight using his strength – he uses his mind. If he fights Goku one-on-one, Goku's going to win. But *FighterZ* is 3v3, so we thought that if we used Krillin as a support character, we could include him in the game in quite a unique way."

We're concerned, not just about the impact that it has on a match-to-match basis, but about serious players feeling forced into picking Krillin. How can that be avoided? Hiroki's reply is honest. "There's really no answer yet: we're still making adjustments. We don't just think about balancing one character against another, but the relationship between that character and their team members. We do want to make it that so users don't *have* to use specific characters." Ultimately, we're cautious but hopeful, given Arc's track record, and it's impossible not to respect the commitment to the source material that's led to this balancing headache. More, Hiroki admits, will likely follow: "We are planning to include characters that need to be used in all sorts of unique ways, rather than only valuing strength."

"We are planning to include characters that need to be used in all sorts of unique ways"

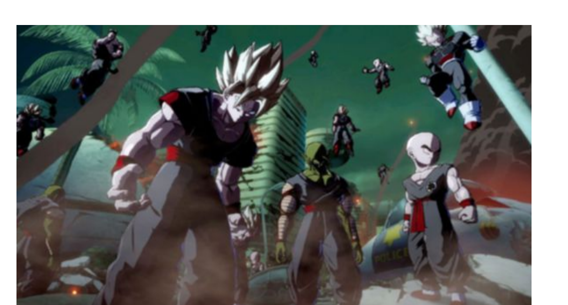
This non-traditional approach extends to *Dragon Ball FighterZ*'s extra modes. While information on the story mode is light – it will be a brand-new, fully animated tale, centred around the series' mysterious android characters – Party Match is a wonderful prospect. It's a six-player online brawl in two teams of three: each person controls one fighter in the team, and tagging the next character in means calling the next *player* in. It's a recipe for slapstick and chaos; online players will also be able to cheer or shame teammates in a realtime chat window using silly stamps and phrases.

Namco and Arc hardly seem to be putting a foot wrong in their attempt to reconcile the wants and needs of two very different audiences. The devil's in the detail, mind you, and anything gimmicky or unbalanced will be quickly dismissed by the hardcore community. But if *Dragon Ball FighterZ* can deliver on its ambitious goals, it could set a new precedent for the genre. And if not, well, at least it looks fantastic. ■

Just saiyan

Pre-orders will grant access to an open beta in January of next year, as well as 'early unlocks' for two characters, meaning you'll be spared the trudge of having to unlock them by meeting some as-yet-unspecified in-game requirements. The blue-haired Super Saiyan God Super Saiyan Goku – yes, really – and similarly prefixed Vegeta are distinct characters from their regular Super Saiyan roster counterparts. Expect them to be top-tier picks: in the interest of yet again being faithful to the anime, says Hiroki, they are considerably more powerful, although there will be more of a skill requirement to meet: "You will have to train hard to use them properly. For the people who aren't that used to the game, Super Saiyan Goku and Vegeta are a lot easier to use."

An all-new story for the game's campaign mode means even those unfamiliar with Dragon Ball will be able to understand the action





AGE OF EMPIRES IV

Developer Relic Entertainment **Publisher** Microsoft
Format PC **Origin** Canada **Release** TBA



So it turns out that a 4K remake of the original *AOE* wasn't the limit of Microsoft's plans for the series. Ten years after its previous instalment, and with original developer Ensemble having shut down, we thought *Age Of Empires* was gone for good. With Relic on development duties, it's in good hands.

JURASSIC WORLD EVOLUTION

Developer/publisher Frontier Developments **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** UK **Release** Summer 2018



The slow, teasing build of the trailer may have been gazumped by a Microsoft presenter naming the game before a frame had even been shown, but never mind that: Frontier's licensed tie-in looks like a match made in heaven. *Planet Coaster*, for all its charms, never let you sic a Tyrannosaur on a troublesome group of guests. No studio on the planet has a better understanding of theme-park games; with dinosaur bioengineering added to the *PlanCo* blend of park building and guest management, Frontier could be on to a real winner with *Jurassic World Evolution*. Seems a bit far fetched, mind, but we'll stick with it.

SHENMUE III

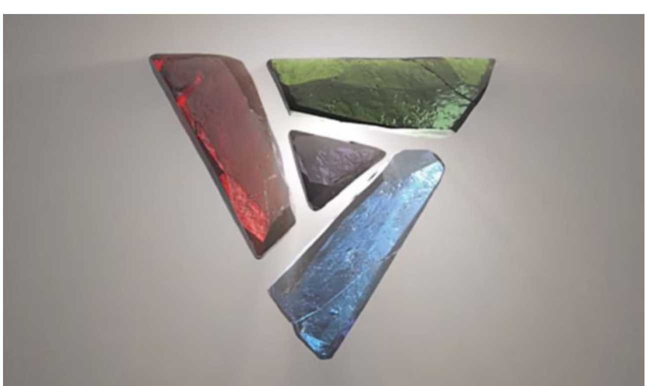
Developer Ys Net **Publisher** Deep Silver
Format PC, PS4 **Origin** Japan **Release** 2018



Yu Suzuki must be wondering why he bothered. He went to Gamescom finally ready to show *Shenmue III* – and all anyone could do was laugh at protagonist Ryo Hazuki's face, which remains motionless throughout the trailer. That will, obviously, be fixed, especially with new publisher Deep Silver's backing.

ARTIFACT

Developer/publisher Valve **Format** PC **Origin** US **Release** TBA



The perils of announcing a game to a live audience were laid bare at The International. With *Half-Life 3* assumed dead and Valve's days as a game developer seemingly behind it, the sight of a teaser trailer had the room in raptures until the words 'The Dota Card Game' appeared, and the crowd went wild – in the bad sense. It'll make Valve another fortune, no doubt, but it's one more nail in the coffin of what was once one of the most creative studios on the planet.

BIOMUTANT

Developer Experiment 101 **Publisher** THQ Nordic
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** Sweden **Release** 2018



The first game from Experiment 101 – a new studio helmed by former Avalanche creative director Stefan Ljungqvist – is this action-RPG whose familiar visual style belies intriguing mechanics. As the name implies, you'll drastically change your appearance and abilities using prosthetics and mutations.

#311

VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY

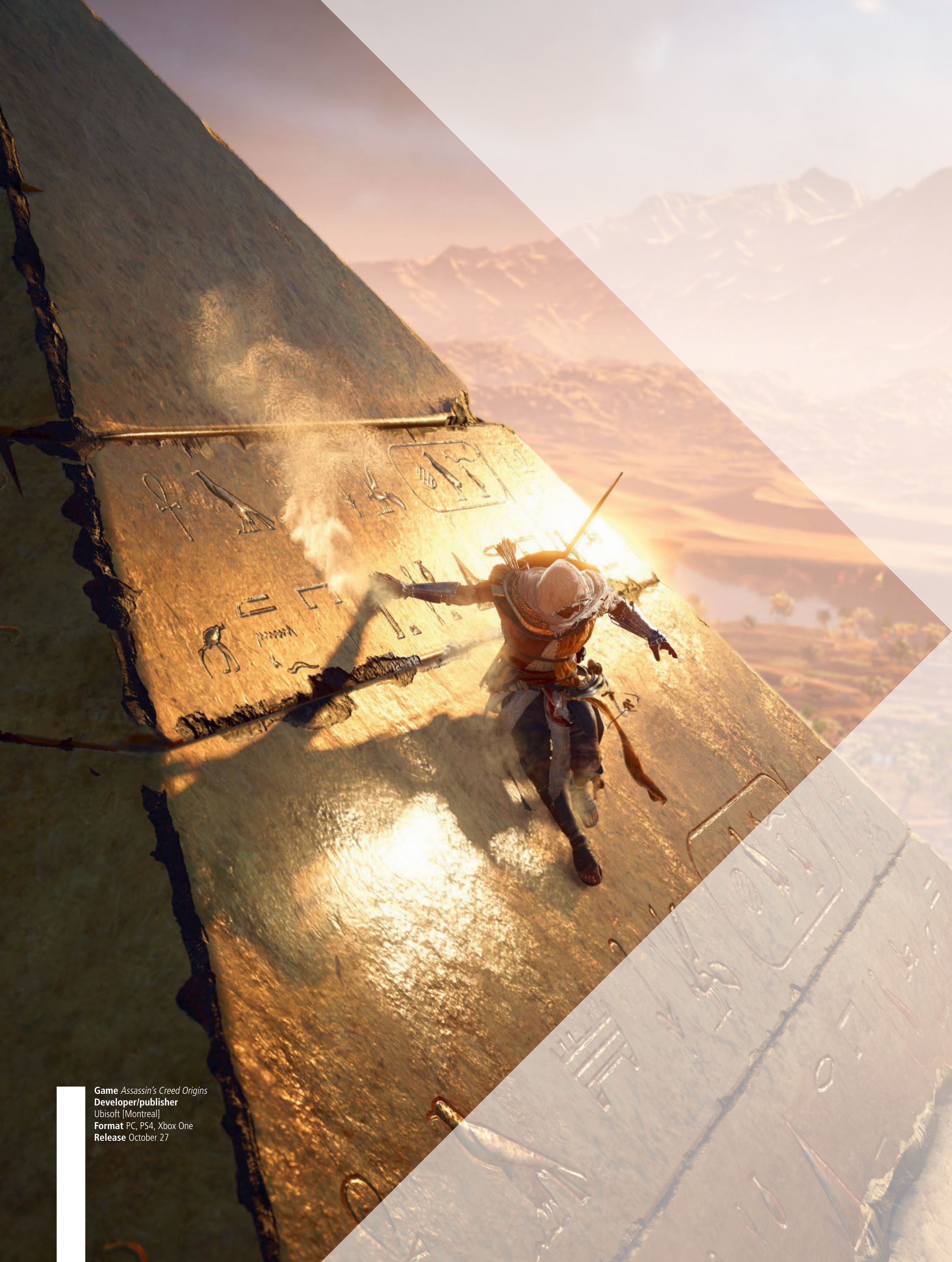


S A N D S O

After a year in the shadows, Ubisoft's biggest series re-emerges to show off its wild side

By Jen Simpkins

F T I M E



Game *Assassin's Creed Origins*
Developer/publisher
Ubisoft [Montreal]
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Release October 27

A year is a long time in videogames – but not, it seems, in videogame marketing. It all started so promisingly: Ubisoft's announcement that there would be no entry in the mainline *Assassin's Creed* series in 2016 was a bold one, and, after years of creative stagnation, probably the right one too. Millions of unit sales were willingly cast aside as the publisher said it would be "stepping back and re-examining" the well-worn template of its safest bet. *Unity* left a sour taste in 2014; a year later *Syndicate* mostly washed over us, an overfamiliar murder tour of old-timey London notable only for the novelty of its setting and its charming dual protagonists. Despite that, we missed the series last year, and walked into our demo at this year's E3 excited to see what had changed. Apparently not much had. The world is really big now, they said. There are more objectives. Hey, we stuck some feathers on a *Watch Dogs 2* drone and now you've got Senu, a fully controllable tactical eagle. It's the same old *Assassin's* fans know and either love or blithely ignore, only... better, kind of.

Not quite. The truth is, despite what the semi-automatic marketing spiel and restrictive demos might suggest, that Ubisoft has actually done it: *Assassin's Creed* is *different*. That's where all that extra development time has gone; not on simply making a better version of what has gone before, but on making something else. And while a new RPG structure, a rebuilt combat system and an AI world far wilder than we had expected does have us – and, we suspect, Ubisoft – a little worried about what exactly the definition of an *Assassin's* game now *is*, we can't help but feel that it's a good problem to have.

It's a journey upon which the team at Ubisoft Montreal embarked four years ago, fresh from finishing up development on *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*. "We knew that in terms of mechanics, of fundamentals, there was stuff that needed to be rewritten," *Origins* producer and series veteran **Julien Laferrière** tells us during our visit to the Montreal studio. "Because we had time in front of us, we said, 'OK, we have the opportunity.'" Director **Ashraf Ismail** agrees: "We needed this time, four years, to ship a game of this scope. We felt that, from an intention standpoint and a technological standpoint, we were at the stage to make this type of game. We also felt that the [series] would need it by this point." In *Black Flag*, Ismail and his core team had deepened the strategy and progression of *Assassin's Creed III*'s naval combat. The resulting success inspired them to take a bigger risk with the fundamentals of *Origins*. "What we saw was that the RPG element [in *Black Flag*] worked really well," Ismail says. "It was sort of subversive and hidden, but it *was* an RPG element."

And thus, with its new quest structure and levelling systems, *Origins* is an RPG, all but abandoning the series' stealth-action tradition. It is set not just in a single, scalable city, but across the seamless expanse of Ptolemaic Egypt – although, of course, still within Abstergo Industries' magical mystery memory box, the Animus. Protagonist Bayek levels up: kills and exploration earn him XP, golden damage numbers popping up over heads. Looting corpses no longer merely yields pocket change and smoke bombs, but weapons and gear of various uses and rarities. Most importantly, missions have been replaced with a quest system that is finally designed to let you spin multiple plates at once, rather than forcing you to quit out of one mission and fail it in order to begin another.

There is still a main narrative questline, telling of how Bayek's actions lead to the formation of the Brotherhood, but there are also sidequests – hundreds of them, we're told – to simultaneously take on. Given the series' past penchant for bland, frustrating design in missions off the beaten path, our instinctive reaction is a sort of hollow dread. But this, ▶

BAYEK IS LIKE

Writing a protagonist with range and relatability is no mean feat, and care has gone into making sure Bayek is an engaging hero. He is an expressive, reactive and changeable sort: *Origins* is set at the tipping point between Egypt and the new Roman era, and the team wanted him to be a mirror of his time. Indeed, sidequest cutscenes show him as willing to playfully roughhouse with the local kids as 'Uncle Bayek' as he is to brutally rip apart a wrongdoer. He is one of the last Medjay – warriors of a paramilitary force designed to both keep order and help civilians deal with their day-to-day troubles. He is also, of course, the beginning of the Brotherhood: as such, his 'proto-assassin' appearance was designed as an homage to Altaïr, with subtle accents of the classic assassin's white-and-red garb.

we're assured, is a different *Assassin's*, with quests and objectives rethought. Put it this way: there are no more tailing missions. "There are some people who just couldn't care less about stealth," Ismail says. "There was frustration when you had a mission that demanded you play stealthily and would even desynchronise [Animus terminology for 'fail'] you if you didn't. We don't want to make missions like that anymore. We want it to be much more open."

After hearing all that, we have high hopes when we're dropped into our latest demo, ready to be let loose upon ancient Egypt. A fully scalable city is one thing: an entire country is quite another. "Building *Black Flag*, we went for a world that was about wilderness," Ismail says. "There were cities, but it was really about the grandiose nature of the world. We wanted to continue doing that with Egypt. We wanted to go to a place that, yes, had villages, and caves, and cities, but also ensure that there was a big element of the wild in it."

In the old tradition, we immediately make a beeline for the highest point we can see – a pyramid, naturally – safe in the assumption that a map-revealing viewpoint will be waiting at the top. But after shimmying up to the shining golden capstone we're rewarded not with fog clearing into a sea of mission icons, but with a handful of question marks. They are now presented as opportunities; as suggestions, rather than didactic objectives.

"Just this small change triggers the natural curiosity of people," Laferrière says. "Even the way the land is built, using dunes, mountains or hills, creates natural obstacles that make you want to go on top of that hill to see what's on the other side. And it plays very well with the variety of biomes we have." The differences in terrain ripple across the horizon: ripe green swamp lies to the south, while villages and supernaturally purple mountains stretch out to the west, beyond our golden desert. It is a vast, gilded playground, and life goes on across the entire country, even when Bayek's not around to impact upon it. "The AI is fundamentally different in the way we populate the world," Ismail says. "Every NPC has an agenda. Farmers, priests, animals, crocodiles, hippos – they all have a lifecycle, schedule and agenda."

Unfortunately, we're denied a chance to put that to the test, and are instead chivvied into a sidequest – which proves painfully familiar at first. A robbery sets us on the trail of a Greek geographer's notes, a process that mostly involves using Senu to pinpoint objectives from the air – Eagle Vision indeed – then trotting our camel between markers, talking to various NPCs in order to figure out exactly what happened. Yet as the mission wears on, we begin to appreciate the increased freedom of approach afforded to us. Thanks to careful design and *Origins'* introduction of a non-linear skill tree, there are multiple ways to go about reaching our quarry.

Said new skill menu is split into three interconnecting branches: Warrior, Hunter and Seer. Ability points acquired from stone tablets hidden in Egypt's many tombs can be fed into the various sides: Warrior perks make Bayek more proficient in all-out, hand-to-hand combat, while Hunter abilities support more of a ranger playstyle with the bow. Seer is the most nebulous – Ismail describes it as a "manipulation style" that helps players achieve objectives more indirectly, using tools such as firebombs and smoke screens, letting Bayek hold his breath underwater longer, or alter the time of day.

AS THE MISSION WEARS ON, WE BEGIN TO APPRECIATE THE INCREASED FREEDOM OF APPROACH AFFORDED TO US

As you'd expect, you can spend points wherever you please, tailoring Bayek's abilities to fit your desired playstyle. This, in turn, has influenced the dev team's approach to mission design. "Quests need to be open enough that you could use any approach you want, and have it be valid," Ismail says. We soon see his point. A familiar haystack beckons below Bayek's perch; swan-dive into it, and we could fight our way through a narrow cave with brute force. With *Origins'* new, FromSoft-style brand of melee swordplay, it's a more appealing prospect than the button-mashing action of previous titles. But running along the top of the ravine are abandoned walkways for archers, forgotten bundles of arrows offering up opportunities for silent, distant headshots. Bushes throughout the cave, meanwhile, provide cover for stealthy takedowns. In the end, we tear through the camp using a mix of all three approaches, reach our hostage, and ▶



ABOVE **The River Nile is Egypt's lifeblood, used for agriculture, trade, religion and, handily, stealth assassinations**

LEFT **The minimap is gone: a Bethesda-style compass and Senu's recon powers help keep your focus on the world.**
BELOW **Gladiator arena battles see you fight three waves and a boss. While the strategic element shines, the actual fighting feels clunky**





set her free. It's an improvement, certainly, but we'd rather be somewhere else. To be sent here, with such promise apparently awaiting us out in the world at large, seems a bit of a waste.

Things change dramatically in the final part of the quest. The bandit's ringleader is our target, and we're told he should be riding around on horseback somewhere near the Pyramid Of Khufu. The marker, however, tells us he is not. We're advised to try out our Dawn & Dusk ability, in order to fast-forward time and hopefully bring him a little closer. The marker ends up even further away. It's a funny moment, and judging by reactions around us, was clearly not part of the plan for our demo. The horseman, it seems, has one of his own. It's the first real surprise of the day.

The second isn't far behind, and is just how seamlessly we begin the fight with the bandit leader, our being on the back of a camel no impediment to reaching for and using the weapons we've become familiar with on the ground. We've wrangled with *Origins'* new combat once before, at E3, and so are at least a little familiar with the game's use of a slower system of hand-to-hand death-dealing. For a second time we're unconvinced by it, especially when, later on, we load into a gladitorial arena and wrestle as much with the camera and the jerky imprecision of our movements as we do with our aggressors. Out in the world, at least, the way in which we're able to easily switch between different types of combat means that, even if the kinks in the melee system aren't entirely smoothed out, we will at least have the means to avoid doing too much of it.

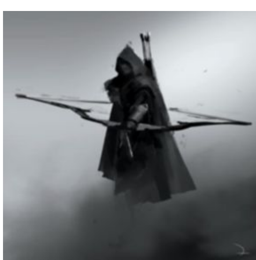
This ease of transition between various systems can, once again, be traced back to *Black Flag*. "Even if it was well-realised visually and felt like you were doing naval combat, it was really built off of behaviour, mechanics, strategies and patterns," Ismail says. "We took that philosophy and applied it [here] to ground combat, ranged combat, vehicle combat." The idea is to have types of combat and movement segue invisibly into each other with a control scheme that remains consistent whether you're fighting on the sand, diving into the Nile, climbing the Sphinx – or firing from a camel.

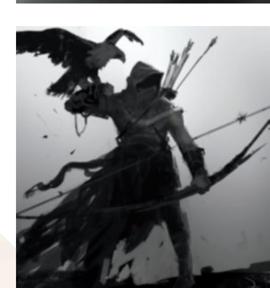
Indeed, we instinctively know how to pull out our bow while riding and take potshots at the bandit leader. Wheeling round to keep him in our crosshairs is intuitive, too, aided by a welcome touch of auto-aim, and when it's time to pull out a sword it all just happens as it should. These discrete systems are working, if not in perfect harmony, then at least sitting flush to one another, the joinery invisible.

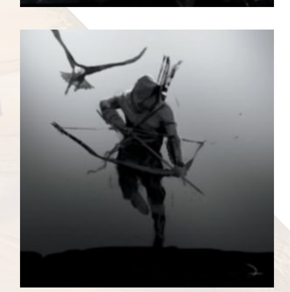
It makes it abundantly clear that a ten-year-old system and philosophy has been rebuilt ▶

01

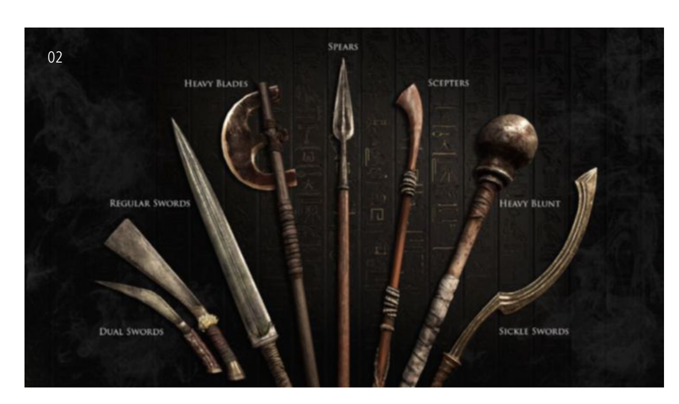


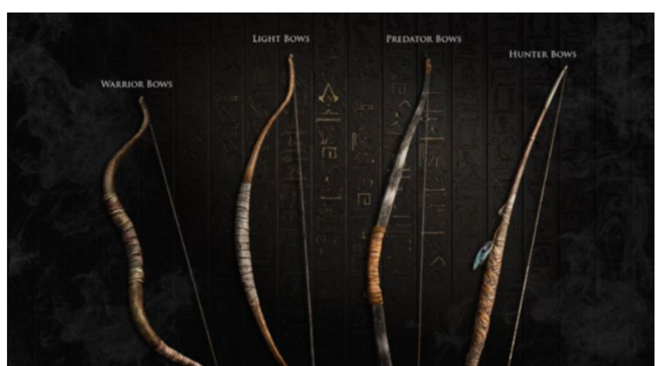




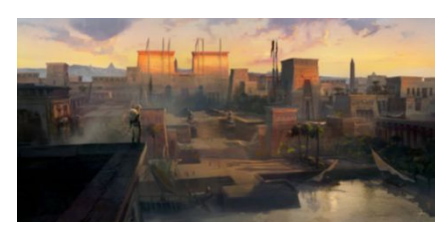


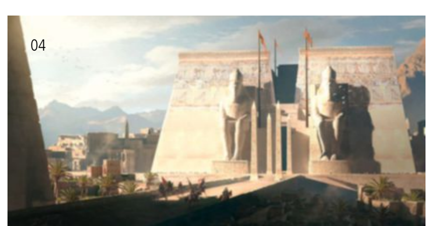


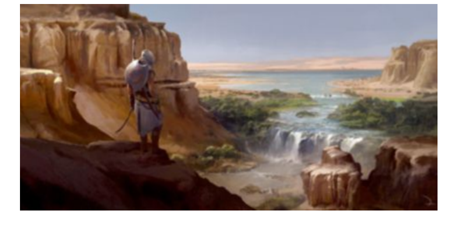




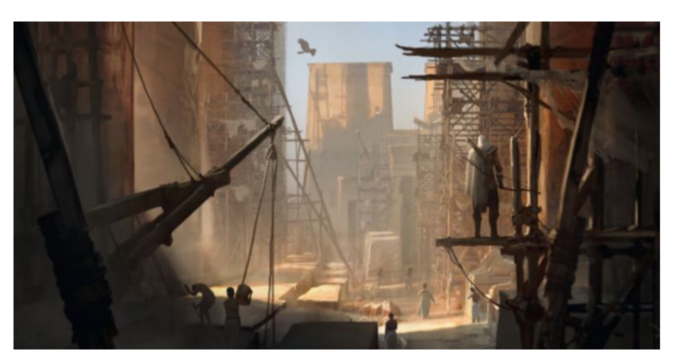


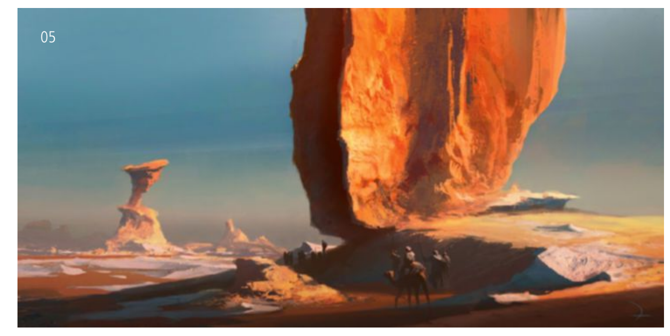


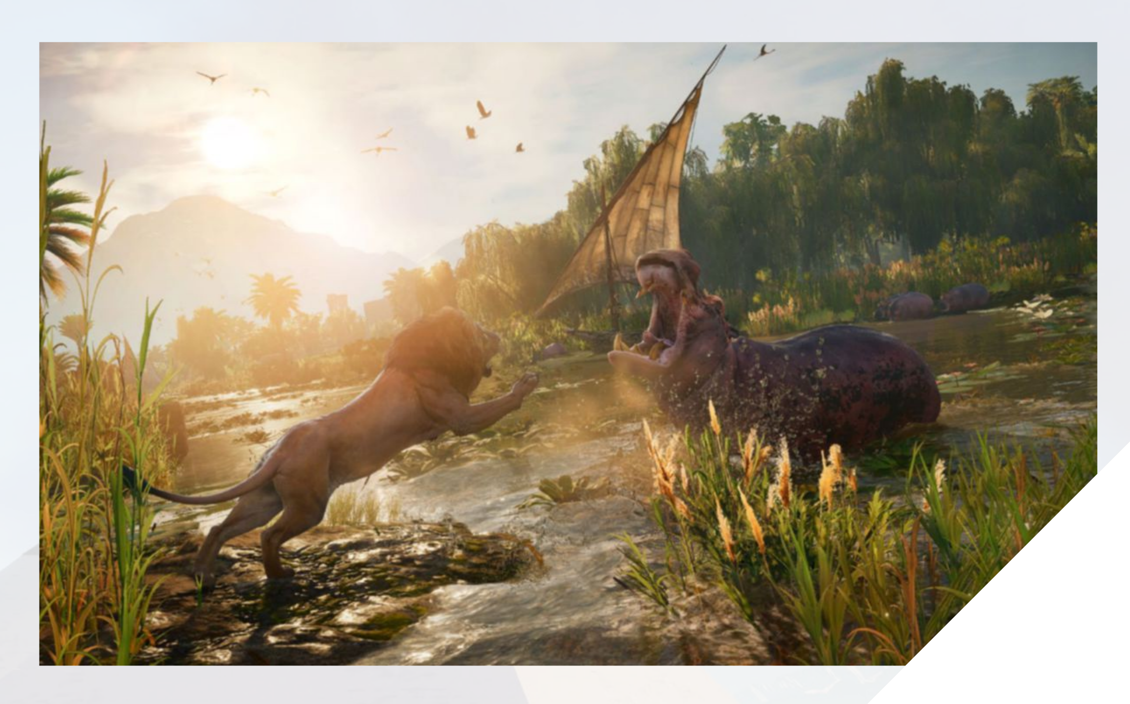


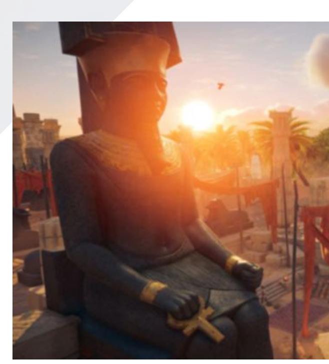


01 Bayek's final design was the result of many iterations. Nevertheless, customisation is prominent: different pieces of gear will alter his look, and there will be a number of special outfits to unlock.
02 Weapons in past *Assassin's Creed* games have tended towards subtlety, all swift, silent knives and fancy rapiers. *Origins*' armoury, however, is antiquated, and much more brutal as a result.
03 Ubisoft's Egypt has been designed with a painterly eye: we're told the sprawling watercolours of historical artist David Roberts were a particular inspiration.
04 Ancient Egypt is forgotten enough that *Origins'* artists can mix elements of fantasy and reality to create more epic vistas and leave bigger impressions, creative director Jean Guesdon tells us.
05 Fieldwork was required to recreate certain landscapes accurately: the team took hundreds of pictures of rocky terrain in the Nevada Desert to reference when designing *Origins'* sandier sections









ABOVE **If you've unlocked the ability, you can tame wild animals after knocking them out with a sleep dart: they will follow Bayek and fight for him.** RIGHT **The open RPG structure and skill-based combat means you can challenge enemies many levels higher and still be in with a chance at victory**

BELOW **Demos have been short on climbable buildings, but cities Memphis and Alexandria (with its Great Library) will feature**





from scratch. "The first prototypes that we did were actually in Unity 3D," Ismail says. "We had this fight system with balls and cubes running around. We did whatever we needed to do to try and achieve the gameplay we wanted, to set the intentions early, because we knew we needed a long time to fully realise it. This was all stuff that we did even before *Unity* shipped. It's one reason we want people to play the game. We can scream until we're blue in the face that the fighting is different, but people need to play it and feel it."

Each of the myriad weapons found throughout the world will have its own strategic pros and cons. A heavy axe's attacks must be slowly charged to knock enemies to the ground, where follow-up attacks will deal bonus damage; staffs deal low damage but are quick and rangey, and attacks can be chained, with a combo multiplier rewarding aggressive play with extra damage. Dual blades are swift and deadly – a mobility perk helps you control space – and are excellent at building your adrenaline meter. A full one can be triggered with both attack buttons for a brief combat advantage. There are two types, dependent on the weapon you're using: a blue meter indicating a one-shot special attack that must be landed with timing and care, and a yellow one for a Fury mode that briefly increases Bayek's speed and power. Switch to a different blade, and your meter carries over; you can use a weapon that fills it quickly, then change to one with whichever special attack is more appropriate for the situation. There are bows, too, including a long-range Predator sniper that lets you aim down sights, and the three-bolt, quick-firing Warrior bow that the development team has affectionately nicknamed 'the shotgun'.

It's a level of nuance, flexibility and variety that's unlike anything we've seen in *Assassin's Creed* until now. Ismail turns this broad toolset on various enemy types that he spawns, with a debug menu, into this little section of the world, and the layers of his team's past four years of labour just keep peeling back. We're shown how to take down a Brute's shield, how to take on the advanced super fighter's parries and javelins, and what to do about the trickster Predator, who uses stealth and smoke bombs to chip away at Bayek's health and stamina.

It's a lot to take in, then, and it remains to be seen how hardened fans will take to an overhaul of a system that has never felt like much of a focus for the series. We doubt, however, they'll complain too much about *Origins'* complex, AI-driven world – the possibilities of which are intriguing, and which are only hinted at by our developer-controlled demo by the banks of an Egyptian river.

A crocodile's sudden appearance from the nearby water halfway through an enemy demonstration prompts chaos. It thrashes about in the thick of the fight, causing panicked grunts to accidentally hit each other. It snaps angrily at Bayek before it's yanked unceremoniously from the fray by the devs like a naughty puppy, if you could despawn a naughty puppy with a mouse click. Back to the demonstration, all goes smoothly enough until an army of chariots gallops over, our little sparring spot clearly visible on their patrol route at this time of day.

"The game world is quite active," Ismail says, putting it mildly. "We don't spawn stuff in the player space, and we don't spawn events around the corner [from you] – Senu can see things from hundreds of metres away. We allow the world to live. You can show up to a camp where you see dead bodies everywhere, dead animals. Okay, so maybe an hour ago there was a big fight here. And we accept the fact that you can just loot and leave, or show up in the middle of a fight. So there's a lot of really cool emergent stuff that can happen that feels organic." It is one of the more captivating elements of *Origins*, and indicative of where all that development time has gone – although it makes for a much tougher demo than previous, more predictable games in the series. No wonder the E3 build left us cold: all the good stuff was switched off. "Well, we accept that we don't try to demo that stuff, but if something cool happens, like chariots and horsemen coming by while we're trying to show you a Predator? Why not? Let it happen."

Ismail has not always been this relaxed about *Origins'* unscripted moments of magic, admittedly. He tells of how terrified he was to watch Ubisoft's chief creative officer Serge Hascoët playing the game when the AI decided to disrupt his plan to stealth-assassinate a sleeping target. "All of a sudden, we see these ▶

IT'S A LEVEL OF NUANCE, FLEXIBILITY AND VARIETY THAT'S UNLIKE ANYTHING ELSE WE'VE SEEN IN ASSASSIN'S CREED UNTIL NOW

REWRITING HISTORY

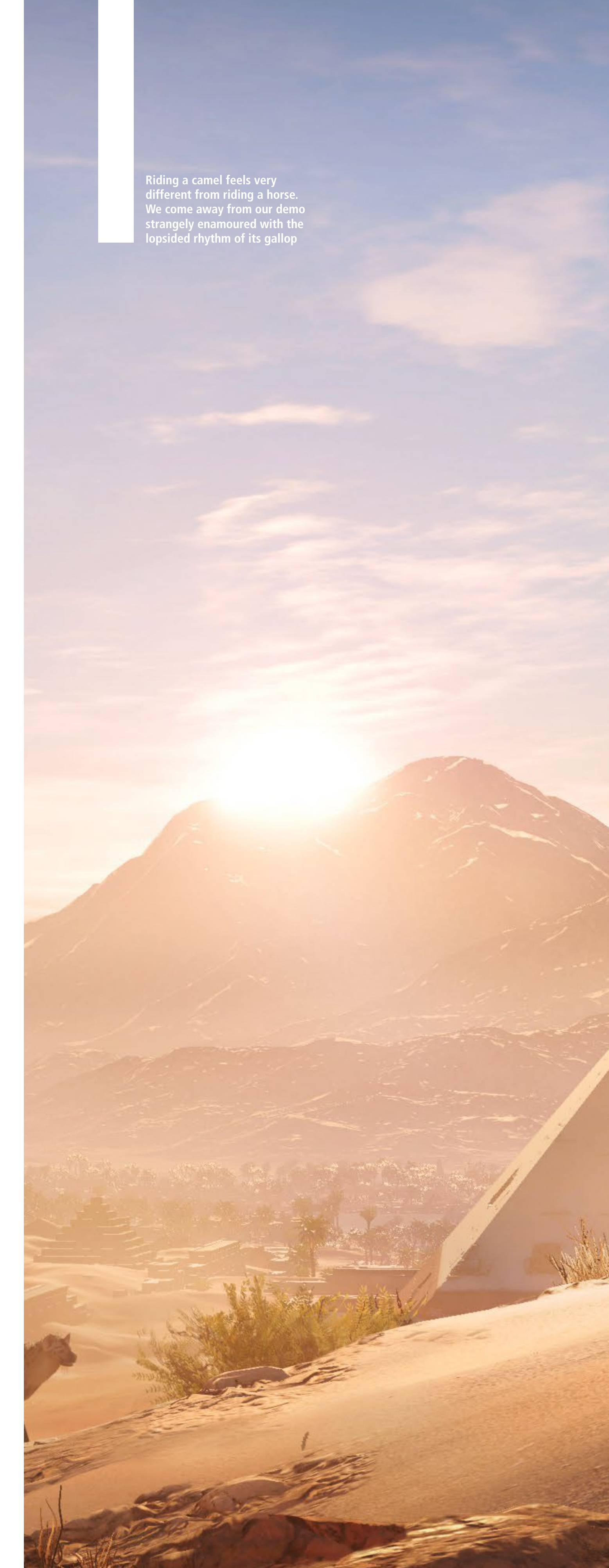
***Assassin's Creed*'s historical representations have always blurred the line between fact and fiction to great effect, and the same is true of *Origins*. Tomb-raiding returns, claustrophobic mazes littered with traps and treasure rooms filled with gold, loot and – less romantic, this – ability points. Many are faithful recreations of Ancient Egyptian tombs: those who read up on their Ptolemaic history and know where to look will find some well-placed secrets. The team have taken some creative licence, too, adding extra secret chambers. Egyptian gods are, we're told, "well represented" in the game, and the fantastic possibilities of powers or buffs have definitely been thought about, although Ubisoft is keeping its cards close to its chest. One thing is certain, however: the century-hopping time anomalies of *Unity* and *Syndicate* will not appear. There's a similar element, though, that Ismail is loath to spoil: "We have fun with the fact that we're not actually in Egypt, we're inside the Animus. But they're not time anomalies, per se."**

guys charging into the base and starting to attack, and there's a horn blown. We see the captain running out of one of the chambers, and he starts charging into the fight. And at first my reaction was, 'Oh god, no. No.'" A faction of rebels just so happened to decide to rescue some of their prisoners of war. The captain AI finished the fight, Ismail praying he'll go back to bed. He didn't: he instead scaled a tower to begin lookout, the AI now in scouting mode, too riled up to sleep. Hascoët – a fan, apparently, of the silent kill – instead drew his bow. "He killed him and he put the controller down and he looks at us and he's like, 'Amazing.' He was just loving the moment."

Let it happen, then. But there's still an appreciable nervousness among the *Assassin's* team – little surprise, perhaps, given how long many of them have been working on the series, and the extent to which their new game chucks away many of the old conventions. Laferrière, who has been working on the series since *Assassin's Creed II*, remembers that the change in genre, style and combat meant the team was "pretty anxious – well, a mix of anxious and excited – right before E3."

It seems that chopping up the sprawl of *Origins* into easily digestible demo-friendly chunks has taken precedence for now, those vital features turned off for the stage and showfloor, giving the impression of a game that, despite its extra time in development, hasn't changed much. "What you didn't experience," Ismail says, "is the fact that eventually, by having all these quests running, by having what we call the 'meta AI' – the way the AI lives in the world, the persistency of it – things can cross over each other, can impact one another."

You could say the same about Ubisoft's work. It is a publisher unafraid to innovate, to take risks, safe in the knowledge that the ideas that do pay off can be used elsewhere in its catalogue. And so within a game this complex – not just complex to make, but to explain, to market, in places even to play – there are familiar little notes. RPG levelling borrowed from *The Division*; *Watch Dogs 2*'s pilfered drone; a dash of *For Honor*'s measured combat. Yet for all that it may enthusiastically magpie from its stablemates, *Origins* has plenty of ideas of its own. Perhaps the grandest of them all is to drop a set of intricate systems, ungoverned, into a vast world, and simply let them do what they will. It's a marketing department's worst nightmare, sure. But for a game about the spirit of discovery and adventure, that might just be a positive sign. Whether it will pay off is another matter: all will surely be revealed when the game is, like its most intriguing elements, at last let loose in the wild. ■



Riding a camel feels very different from riding a horse. We come away from our demo strangely enamoured with the lopsided rhythm of its gallop





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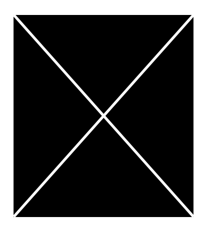
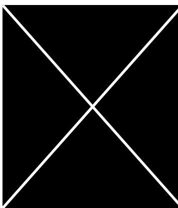
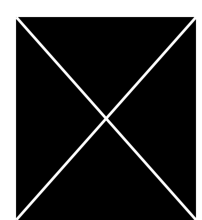

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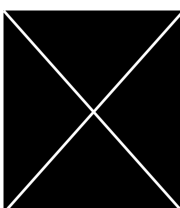


THE KILLING FIELDS

How a new shooter genre emerged from dystopian satire to rule

By Alex Wiltshire



Brendan Greene

The premise is simple: be the last player standing. But the road to victory is fraught. Out there, running across the map somewhere, are dozens of others, each with the same aim and also scavenging for the gear that might give them a sliver of an advantage when the crucial moment arrives.

Battle royale games, as they're known, are about those live-or-die moments when careful preparation turns to heart-stopping panic. When a door suddenly opens and you're face to face with an enemy, or when cold calculation turns to scrappy sprays of bullets as a steady bead on an unwitting target is upset by another player chancing upon the encounter.

High in concept, high in drama, over the past couple of years the battle royale has exploded. It's begun challenging the traditional *COD* and *Counter-Strike* hegemony of online shooters, fuelling thousands of hours of streaming and YouTube videos and entertaining millions of viewers. The biggest, from *Playerunknown's Battle Royale* and *H1Z1: King Of The Kill*, through to the newest and most popular, *Playerunknown's Battlegrounds*, are all designed by one man: **Brendan Greene**, otherwise known as Playerunknown, or PLAYERUNKNOWN, if you follow the unerring way his name is presented in his games' titles.

"There's no linear storyline; you just do whatever you want," Greene tells us. "In battle royale you land and all you have to do is win. That's the only mission you have, and how you choose to do that is completely up to you."

From roots in the modding community around *DayZ*, when he was living in Brazil, to licensing his idea to Sony Online Entertainment when he was living in his native Ireland and then to moving to South Korea to make *Battlegrounds* for online-game publisher Bluehole, the battle royale has certainly taken Greene places. But the idea itself has a long history of its own – one that reflects the organic, almost folk-art way that so many of the biggest game genres, from *DOTA* to team shooters, evolve and grow, often in parallel.

Battle royale's history begins in a movie. You might guess which one. Based on a book by Koushun Takami, the 2000 Japanese cult hit Battle Royale follows a class of school kids who are dumped on an island and have three days to kill each other until only one is left. It's brutal and wry, a satire on Japanese school culture and adults' unjust expectations of children, and about the everyday struggles of adolescence.

It also begins in a series of books which kicked off in 2008. Again, you might have heard of it. Suzanne Collins' The Hunger Games presents a similar setup: 12 children from poverty-stricken districts of a nation under draconian rule are selected to compete in a televised event in which they must kill each other. The sole survivor wins a reward for their district, and it's all watched over as entertainment by the elite classes. It's about rebellion against oppression; of a hero rising and then having to take on the crushing responsibility of leadership.

Both Battle Royale and The Hunger Games are keen parables, using games as a canvas to explore themes of freedom, societal fairness and violence. But they're driven by the same stark and thrilling concept: a violent almost-sport, set in an enclosed space, under controlled circumstances. It's little wonder that it so quickly found expression in videogames.

The first one in which it meaningfully landed was, weirdly, *Minecraft*. Back in 2011, just as it finally left beta, a series of custom maps started appearing in *Minecraft* communities. The maps were just *Minecraft* worlds; they weren't coded, and there was nothing that ran and refereed the games. Instead, the players would agree to obey the rules, not destroying blocks or building where they weren't meant to, playing deathmatches and team survival games.

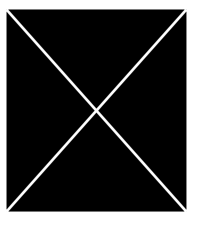
There were also Hunger Games maps. In terms of layout they were straightforward enough, featuring a central area with gear-filled chests, and surrounding lands studded with more, if you could find them. At the start, all the players would stand around the centre, their inventories empty, just as they do in The Hunger Games itself. When the game started, they'd scatter, aiming to find gear and items to prepare them for victory.

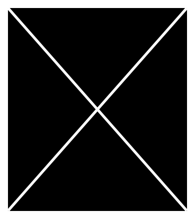
"Since most of these early *Minecraft* game modes started out as loose rulesets between friends on custom maps, it's impossible to tell who made the very first one," says **Simon Laflamme**, founder of Hypixel, which is one of *Minecraft*'s largest ▶

player servers. "In this way it's very similar to custom game modes on old PC firstperson shooters, or games like *Halo*, where friends come up with a special ruleset that slowly over time becomes more formalised, or becomes an actual mod."

As custom maps rose in popularity, servers began to host them, codifying the informal rules into actual game modes, and the one that bust Hunger Games open was a now-defunct server called MCPVP.com. Run by Kurtis 'hclewk' Welch, it made it easy – well, as easy as it was to run custom game types in *Minecraft* back then – to play a game that took *Minecraft*'s survival mode and folded it into an intense deathmatch. You'd do all you did in the base game, finding resources and crafting weapons and armour. But against you were 100 or so other players, a time limit, and permadeath.

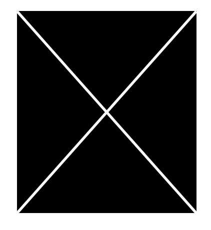
"It was immediately attractive to lots of players, especially as the actual Hunger Games books and movies were very popular at the time," Laflamme says. YouTubers jumped in too, fanning the flames of the Hunger Games, often also called Survival Games, and noting how entertaining they were to watch. In March 2012, they really started to take off.

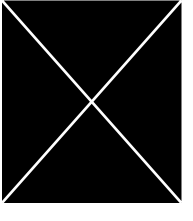




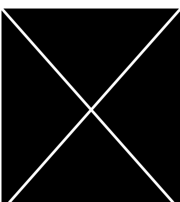
"IT WAS IMMEDIATELY ATTRACTIVE TO LOTS OF PLAYERS, ESPECIALLY AS THE HUNGER GAMES BOOKS AND MOVIES WERE VERY POPULAR AT THE TIME"

Servers quickly developed their own versions, adapting the rules a little to differentiate themselves, improve on the core concept, or better fit their server technology and coding skills. "Some of the most popular additions reflect the Hunger Games books and media themselves; some restricted the play area over time, forcing players into a deathmatch-type scenario to avoid camping," says Laflamme, who soon added his own take on Hypixel, where the mode is known today as Blitz Survival Games. Other innovations were 'kits': persistent sets of items or abilities that players could unlock on a server and upgrade over time to add progression and keep them playing. Some featured randomly generated maps, or randomised loot in chests and boxes. Some emphasised the survival side of the game. But in this tumult of competing servers all wanting to cash in on a craze, the fundamental form of the battle royale was set.





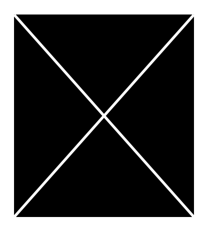
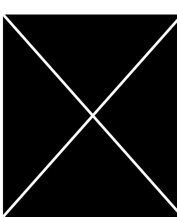
It's at this point that the story changes tracks, and into a different game – another sprawling, PC cult favourite which was about to get its own player-made addition. In the summer of 2012, Dean Hall released a mod for *Arma 2* which transformed the military simulation into a hardcore, multiplayer, zombie-survival game. *DayZ* was a phenomenon on its own terms, a survival sandbox that generated amazing player stories of comradeship, mercy, betrayal and murder that were natural fits for Twitch, the streaming platform which had launched the previous year.

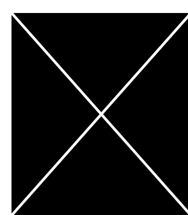
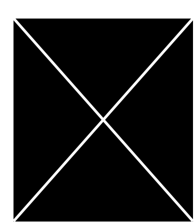


Three of those early *DayZ* Twitch streamers were **Brian Hicks**, who worked in publishing at Microsoft Game Studios; Louis Doran, who was still at university; and Jordan Tayer, who'd gone into streaming full-time. "All three of us were absolutely obsessed with playing and livestreaming the original *DayZ* mod on Twitch," Hicks tells us. He was beginning to get into the *Arma 2* modding scene himself, learning how to build on top of *DayZ*.

It was Tayer who hit on the idea of creating a Hunger Games mode in *DayZ*. The team jumped at it, and worked out a plan to invite other streamers to play in a massively televised single game based on a private server. Every player would stream their game, and it would be called Survivor GameZ. The first took place on October 20, 2012, featuring 36 players split into 18 teams. Like the old *Minecraft* Hunger Games maps, the rules were not hardcoded, so players agreed to play by them, starting in a circle around a central cache of loot in tents.

Hicks, Doran and Tayer formalised the rules, promoted the game and won sponsorship, and, perhaps most importantly, created the means by which the action would be captured. "Hands down, the two major points that made the Survivor

Brian Hicks

GameZ work so well are the camera and the content creators," Hicks says. They developed a free-floating caster camera so they could stream the game as they flew around the gameworld, and a dynamic map to show what was happening on a global scale. "It allowed for an almost esports style of content creation," he says. "Adding into the mix known personalities and their audiences just instantly increased the tension and excitement."

The game itself was steadily refined over the next few years. The team count fluctuated slightly, but 16 to 18 groups of two players was the sweet spot for technical performance in *DayZ*. Many of its features came directly from The Hunger Games and latterly Battle Royale, and remarkably, not from the games in *Minecraft*. "Surprisingly, no," Hicks says. "I was not aware of *Minecraft* Hunger Games events until several years into the Survivor GameZ."

Instead, they looked back at the original source material. The distribution of tents in the middle of the circle was from The Hunger Games, which they realised added dramatic unpredictability right at the start of the match. "Do you run for the centre and test your luck?" says Hicks. "Is it worth it in the end? You could lose everything, before the game really kicks off." And then there was the phase system, which was proposed by one of the contestants and a leading streamer, Chris 'Sacriel' Ball, who was inspired by the way Battle Royale's characters are prevented from accessing parts of the island by the people running their grim game. Survivor GameZ matches were divided into three phases, each set in progressively smaller areas of the map, pressing the survivors ever closer. Any player straggling in an area that was closed down was hit by airstrikes, or hunted by gangs of admins.

There were seven main Survivor GameZ events, divided into qualifier and finals matches, each supported by fully illustrated and story-filled rulebooks with associated branding which gave them a narrative context and strong sense of character. But it all petered out in 2015. Survivor GameZ was never opened to the public; conceived as a spectator sport, it stayed that way. "I just didn't see it possible, especially given that I had a full-time job at the time," Hicks says. "We were very clear about this fact, that we weren't interested at the time in releasing a public game mode."

Instead the team worked on selling the *Survivor GameZ* IP to *Arma*'s maker, Bohemia Interactive, which had hired *DayZ*'s creator in 2013 and soon made it into a standalone game. Their negotiations led to Doran and Hicks joining Bohemia – Hicks becoming creative director of *DayZ* – while Tayer joined Twitch.

The scene was set for someone else to come in and make a battle royale game that anyone could play. Enter an Irish graphic designer, DJ and photographer who lived in Brazil. Brendan Greene describes himself as not much of a gamer. But he loved *DayZ*, which he played with a tight group of friends on a server he owned, and he wanted to play Survivor GameZ for himself. "That's why I created the Battle Royale mod," he tells us. "It allowed me to play that last-man-standing deathmatch."

The group, which was called Sloppy Seconds, started off playing vanilla *DayZ*. But members soon started to want to play it their own way, emphasising its PVP aspect by making it easier to find good weapons so they could just spawn, grab a gun and kill. Greene took it upon himself to learn how to mod these tweaks, asking for advice within the community and doing favours in return.

"I was helping these guys who were making a mod called DayZ Civilian, and one of the Civilian team, who was a young graphic designer, still studying, suggested making a *DayZ* Hunger Games mod. Then he went away for a week. I didn't really want to use The Hunger Games because of trademarks and all that stuff, and then I remembered Battle Royale, and I was like, 'Oh, hell, this is awesome'. I created the system and planned it out, and he came back after a week and got a little annoyed that I'd changed it to this cult movie that no one had heard about. He said, 'Listen, you can walk and do it yourself,' and I was like, 'OK!'

"I'm sure he's kind of kicking himself now."

Greene was no programmer, and many of the features of the *DayZ* mod he'd started building were direct reflections of that. The way the play area constricts over the course of the match in a circle was because he didn't know how to code squares, the way they're represented in Battle Royale. Some features were simply ▶


01
02
03
Rozhok
Gatka
Pochinki
Lipovk
Mylta Powe

01 ***H1Z1: King Of The Kill*** **markets itself on the fast-paced chaos of its matches; players spawn in random locations at the start of a match and parachute down, and weapons are found everywhere.**
02 **Many Hunger Games events sprang up, including on the *Minecraft* Awesome Server which took place in June 2012. Players started in glass boxes on a specially designed map.**
03 **The towns, villages and hamlets of *Battlegrounds* are a focus for combat because they're where you'll find gear**

remnants of *DayZ*: when a player was caught outside the play zone, the mod would spawn zombies in to chase them down. The rest, such as the realistic gun dynamics and injury system, were simply part of the game that originated it all, *Arma 2*. The finished mod, which he released in 2013, contained just 2,000 lines of code. "It's called a mod, but really it was a game mode," Greene says. "The only modded bits about it were the fact that I added extra weapons and things like that."

Greene's background in web marketing and graphic design helped with getting initial interest. He teased the mod with images subtly featuring the emblematic Green Mountain of *DayZ*'s Chernarus map and a letter that tied into *DayZ* fiction and hinted at a battle royale that was taking place on some nearby island. The eventual full announcement attracted a following of people who wanted just what Greene did: to play Survivor GameZ.

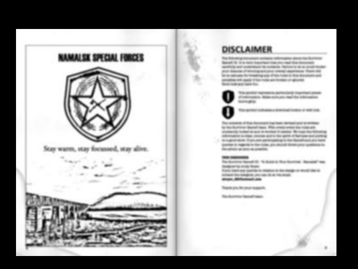
When *DayZ* went standalone, Greene transplanted his game into *Arma 3*. With his DJing and photography work mainly taking place on weekends, his time was free to focus on it – but he faced a stern attitude from his fellow *Arma* modders. The game's modding community believed work should done for the love of it and given away for free. So when *DayZ* blew up, bringing with it many newcomers who saw the opportunity to make lots of money and turn away from the pure military sim that *Arma* epitomises, the community viewed people like Greene suspiciously: "I wasn't spat upon but it was like, 'Get the fuck out of here,'" he says. But he shared their attitude, refusing to make direct money from his Battle Royale games, and was gradually treated more warmly.

It was a philosophy that put a lot of pressure on Greene as he paid to keep things running. When *Arma 3* Battle Royale really started to get successful, Greene decided to return to Ireland, where the Internet was better, to live with his parents. He signed on the dole and spent it all on server costs. "At that stage I was really wondering," he says. "I wanted to make my own version of the game. I wanted to work with Bohemia, maybe, because I loved their map tech and the way their terrains look. I was talking with them about how we could integrate Battle Royale into *Arma 3* a little bit better, as an official game mode or something like that. But there was no real movement with those talks, so when Sony Online Entertainment approached me it was life-saving."

SOE was making *H1Z1*, a populist take on *DayZ*, and wanted to add a battle royale mode. They approached Greene to license his work, and he ended up consulting for two months, resulting in the standalone game, *King Of The Kill*. "Because I was living at home with my parents, having this deal put on the table, it convinced them that what I was doing was real and not just someone playing games. They're pushing 70 now – they don't understand gaming culture."

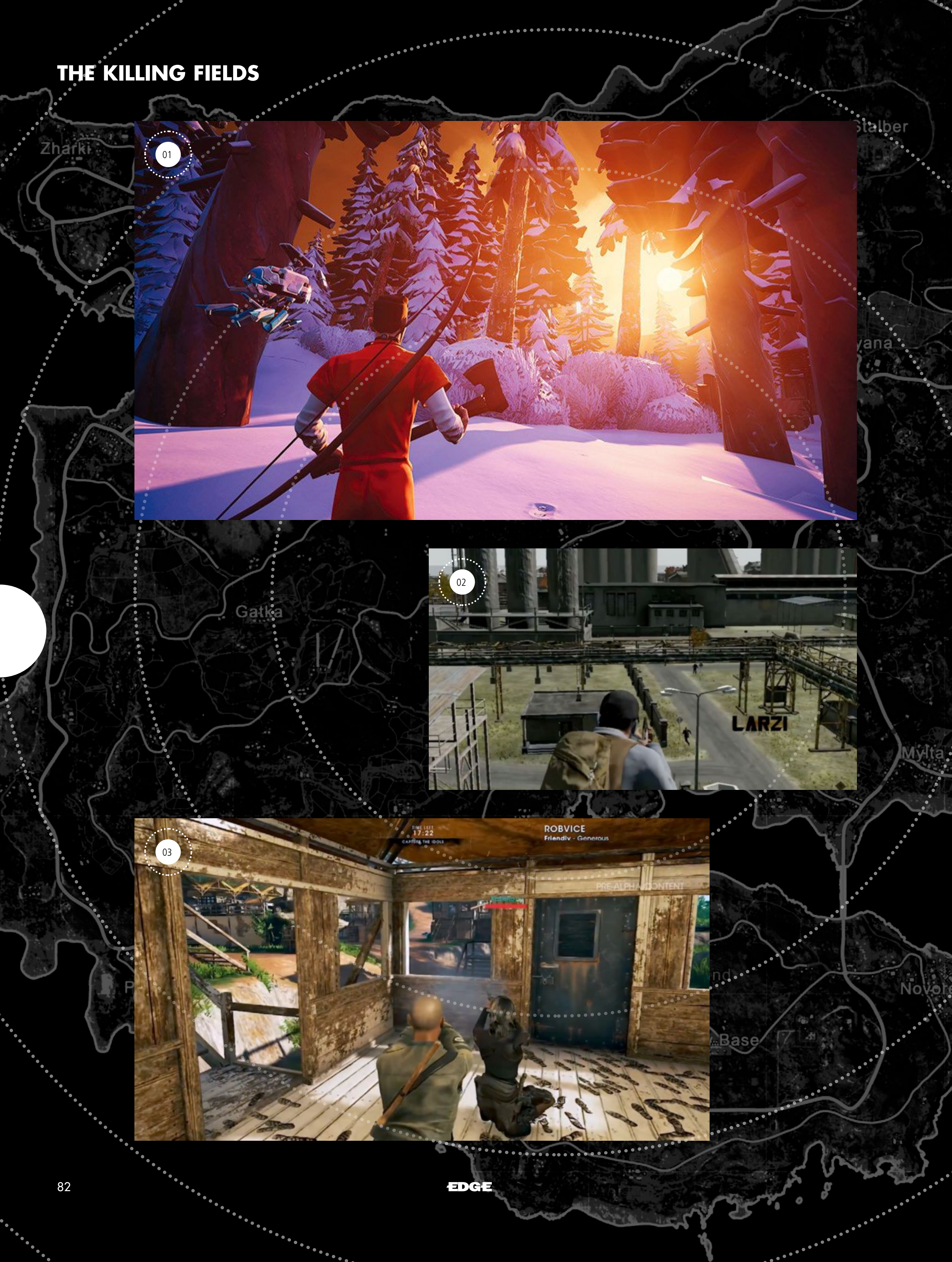
It was a chance to get his game in front of a huge new audience, but *King Of The Kill*'s feel – more arcade than simulation – wasn't exactly to Greene's taste. So when Bluehole, the South Korean publisher behind MMO *Tera*, approached him with a proposal of complete creative control, he jumped. In the resulting project, *Playerunknown's Battlegrounds*, he wanted to reinstate many of the systems he'd created for *Arma 3* Battle Royale, balancing 70 per cent of *Arma*'s realism with 30 per cent of *H1Z1*'s ease of play. "I wasn't considering at all how to make it popular," he says. "I wanted to make this vision I had for a battle royale game in my head. I had four years to think about it, and to figure out exactly what did and didn't work."

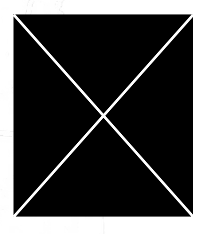
Playerunknown's Battlegrounds released in March 2017, and within five months had sold over eight million copies on PC. In August it briefly supplanted *Dota 2* as the most popular game on Steam. Many of those players wouldn't dream of playing most large-scale online shooters, but they take to the subtleties of design in *Battlegrounds*, of the freedom it gives you to tailor your approach as you seek to be the last one standing. ▶

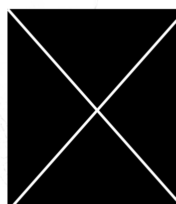


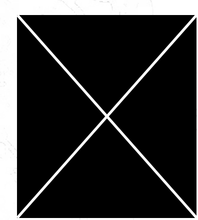
FIELD MANUAL

Alongside each Survivor GameZ event the team presented a guidebook. "Providing competitors with clearly written guidebooks on what was expected of them was critical," says Hicks. Created by Andy Bryer, they explained the game's rules and technical information. But they also gave a thematic background, putting the players into the context of a live operation. "I thought Chernaurus [sic] and Taviana were bad," starts the guide to the third event. "This place is literally hell on earth. Food and medical supplies are scarce, there are almost no safe places to take refuge, almost all abandoned vehicles aren't operational and the bandits are even more desperate and ruthless, due to the weather and food shortages."


Zharki
Stalber
Gatka
Mylta
Novore
Base
01
02
LARZI
03
ROBVICE
Friendly - Generous
17:22
CAPTURE THE IDOLS
PRE-ALPHA CONTENT







One of *PUBG*'s key features is that all 100 players jump from a cargo plane at the start of a match. With choice over where you start and an awareness of how many others are close by seeing where parachutes are heading, you can avoid intense encounters or leap straight for them. Only care and skill will see you survive through to the final ten, but your chances feel wide open. You might crash your Soviet Bloc jeep and die. You might be sniped from who knows where. You might make it to the final five and die in a shed, bullets showering your corpse with splinters of wood. You might be the victor, presented with the instantly legendary onscreen message, 'Winner winner chicken dinner'. *Battlegrounds* is unpredictable, and that's a great source of its allure.

"To me, the key features of the genre are currently still being discovered and iterated upon by modders and developers," says **Mike Daugherty**, senior game designer on *SOS*, a forthcoming battle royale which pits 16 players against each other in a quest to find a relic and escape an island by helicopter. But for him the battle royale is about unpredictable player and loot spawns; interesting questions over what gear to equip; large and open environments to explore; an environmental threat that pushes players together; and above all, a simple win condition that's a real feat to achieve.

That's all there in *Playerunknown's Battlegrounds*, and also in *SOS*. But Daugherty also sees in his game the chance to build on the dramatic and roleplaying side of the battle royale. You can't help but be pulled into *Battlegrounds*' vivid setup, but combat is the de facto conclusion to any player's experience. "For me, battle royale is all about the fight between you and another player," Greene says. "That's the most important thing. Everything else, you shouldn't have to think about. You try to remove all the barriers to fighting another player."



Mike Daugherty

***SOS* seeks to** reinstate something of *DayZ*'s emergent social situations, where playing together, however uneasily, can be the best route to survival. "We love it when we see players behaving beyond the usual bounds of competitive play, roleplaying or interacting with strangers during matches for the sole purpose of entertaining their audience," says Daugherty. *SOS* therefore adds its own features to support that concept. Three players can win, not just one, and the game pushes them together early on when they don't have ranged weapons, making it more likely that they'll band together to face the common threat of AI monsters who roam the island. Other games are trying to make their own mark on the genre. Alongside *SOS* is *The Darwin Project*, a 32-player battle royale which aims to emphasise survival mechanics and crafting alongside special items that give powerful effects, and a feature in which one player can play the role of The Director, able to switch the positions of the others and drop a nuke on the map.

"I think there's a number of battle royale games out there and they've added new features to make themselves stand out, and they're not necessarily good things to add," says Greene. "For a new studio coming into this and trying to figure it out, it's giving players freedom and choice. That's the reason I came into *DayZ*, because it didn't tell me what to do."

For Greene's battle royale, the next step is not imagining new features. It's esports, and he has as simple and powerful a vision for its competitive form as he does for the game itself. "I want to create spectacle in esports," he says. "I want a stadium filled with fans and 64 people sitting in front of PCs in the middle. It's a real big match, not just two teams of five, and to be that first person to walk off is something no one wants."

It's not just the speed with which the genre is growing that makes this idea seem inevitable. From the dystopian satires that first imagined it to its emergence alongside the growth of streaming culture, the battle royale is founded on the baying of the crowds. A hundred players. One winner. Anyone can see the promise in that. ■

01 **Scavenger Studio's *The Darwin Project* is highly stylised and character-led, but it also focuses on the survival aspect of the genre, throwing players into cold environments.**
02 **Even in the third Survivor GameZ, players still informally lined up at the start, breaking into a run for the wilderness when compere Brian Hicks completed the countdown over text chat.**
03 **The idea behind Outpost Games' *SOS* is for players to need to develop uneasy alliances as they work to recover an artefact and escape**



LAST BLOCK STANDING

The popularity of Hunger Games-style games on *Minecraft* servers has significantly waned over the past few years. "We aren't hearing a big demand from the players themselves for these sorts of features," says Laflamme. It might be in part down to how long they've been around. But for an idea of how popular and significant Hunger Games-style games are to *Minecraft*, one need only look at the minigames featured as standard in its console versions. One of the three options, Battle Mode, follows the form precisely, presenting it on maps that are a little tighter than the purist old ones, so the games are more action-packed, but the fundamentals are otherwise all present and correct.



AN AUDIENCE WITH...

YVES GUILLEMOT

How Ubisoft's CEO runs one of the world's biggest family businesses

By Chris Thursten





CV

Yves Guillemot co-founded Ubisoft alongside his brothers in 1986, at the age of 26. He was instrumental in expanding the fledgling publisher from a regional distributor – by 1993 it was the biggest one in France – into a game developer and publisher in its own right, rapidly expanding the company beyond France to Canada, Italy, and, in a first for a western publisher, China. Guillemot's 31-year tenure has seen Ubisoft expand to over 30 studios and offices around the world, employing over 12,000 people. Despite recent interest from Vivendi, Ubisoft is still a family business. Guillemot's four brothers – Christian, Claude, Gérard and Michel – are all executive directors on the publisher's board.

Yves Guillemot is still building the company he and his brothers founded over 30 years ago. Ubisoft's CEO now sits at the head of one of the biggest studio networks in the game industry, a vast creative operation that spans games and is beginning to make its first forays into cinema. Even as Ubisoft extends its reach, however, it faces the danger of a predatory buyout back home. Here, Guillemot discusses the challenges of innovating at huge, global scale; the perception of Ubisoft's rather templated approach to game design; and the struggle to maintain independence in a company under the threat of a hostile takeover.

"IN OUR INDUSTRY, IF YOU DON'T MAKE THE RIGHT CALL, YOU CAN BE IN BIG TROUBLE"

What's your perspective on the recent history of the company, particularly the situation with Vivendi?
We had Vivendi coming in, buying stock and trying to discuss with us how they could get more of the company. We said that we weren't interested in having a company coming in from the outside and not speaking with us before buying shares. From that time, we've not been able to discuss it too much.

Those guys, they have a reputation of being a company that acquires creeping control. We said that we were not interested in creeping control; that if they wanted to buy the company, they had to make an offer. We weren't interested in them buying stakes in the company step by step, then taking control without paying a premium.

For you personally, or more broadly for the business, why is retaining control important?
Our industry doesn't work very well with big corporations. When a company like that comes and wants to take control – wants to decide which projects to do, when to do them, the level of risk the company has to take... when you have a big corporation that does not have a clue about videogames, you know that the agility will not be there. That risk taking will become more complex. In our industry, if you don't make the right call, you can be in big trouble. So for us it's very important for the company to maintain its agility, and creativity, and the ability to take creative risks.

Is there a concern that your expertise, or your management team's expertise, is necessary in order for Ubisoft to function?
This is a company that is very different from many other companies. At Ubisoft, people stay for a long time. It has a system built around people that have been here for quite a while. So when you have a lot of people leaving because they don't want to get into that different way of doing business, you have a company that is more difficult to organise. Anybody can organise a company – it's just the level of creativity that can change.

You seem to place a lot of value on training and retaining expertise.
Exactly – it's the DNA of the company. The types of products we make need creators that take risks, and are dedicated to creating the best experience possible. It doesn't mean that you make it each time, but your goal is to create the best product. These kinds of companies have to take care of their talent, and train their talent, ensuring that they are in a position where they feel they can take risks.

How do you reconcile the size of the company with the need to stay creative?
What's very important is to work on projects that you feel are going to change the world. The number of people can be a constraint, but what is most important is to have talented teams and lots of motivation to win that race. That's what we're trying to do: to make sure that the challenges are real, and that we can identify who we want to compete against and who we want to beat so that we can create a game that is more interesting than what already exists. That is a great motivation for teams; that, plus the fact that you launch something that can be very different to what people expect.

Ubisoft works a lot with established IPs. How do you express that creativity, that need for reinvention when an ever-larger group of people are spending their time working on well-known brands?
For me, an existing IP can be very, very creative. The

advantage of an existing IP is that you know that the brand is recognised by players and that a certain number of them will buy the product [every time]. That tells you that you can put large amounts of investment on that brand because, you know that there will be a certain turnover. Coming with that are some pillars that have to be there – because those fans go for it with the understanding that certain elements will be there. But outside of that, you can create the world you want, you can create the fantasy you want, you can create systems that can be revolutionary. Your creativity can be very strong.

There's a sense that certain game mechanics would often migrate between different Ubisoft titles – towers being the most obvious example. Was that impression something that concerned the studios? Is it something that you made the decision to reduce the appearance of?

It's interesting, because *Zelda* [*Breath Of The Wild*] took a lot of the things that existed in *Far Cry* and other Ubisoft games, but did them perfectly. I think the most important thing is not the systems as they are, it's how they can be perfected; how they can give the player the best experience possible. The same system can be in two games, and not be seen as the same thing. The job, really, is to make sure that you have a certain number of possibilities and that you are able to combine them in such a way that provides a great experience. When systems seem similar, it's because developers have not been able to take full advantage of what those systems could bring [to a game].

When a system is really good at providing fun, the team knows that that will work – and at the end of the day what counts is the experience. But we are taking more and more time on our games so that they are very different from one another. That has always been the objective. But if you look at many of the games that are being launched – even the last Sony game, *Horizon Zero Dawn* – again, they took some of the same systems that we have. Because, in the industry, we always look at other games and other publishers. A game is very complex, so it helps us to provide a good experience.

How important is focus testing and audience feedback when determining what comes next for the company?

Data is becoming more and more important. Seeing what a person is doing – where they didn't go in some cases, when they didn't do some of the things we created and so on – really gives us an indication of how to incentivise our players to go and consume the content that has been created for them. When they stop playing because it's too hard, or they continue to play because they like some ways of doing things, all of those elements should give us the possibility to improve the quality of the game. Not only that they should – they actually do. We spend a lot of time looking at playtests and how people play, so we can change the games in such a way that will be appreciated by different types of players.

Is there something specific about any given IP that makes it internationally successful, or is success for an IP more a matter of the right marketing or the right positioning in the right parts of the world?

Cultures are different, but for the types of games we make, if you really create the right experience, you can be bought anywhere. When you go mobile you start to be very massmarket, so you have to go with cultural specifics. But when you make triple-A games they are so interesting, so different, that if it doesn't belong too much to your country then it won't matter much.

Ubisoft has often been criticised for recycling ideas across different series, but things have improved of late. There are no towers to climb in *Far Cry 5*, we're told



Guillemot started at Ubisoft as a producer on the *Rayman* series; these days it's just part of a colossal IP stable

After a disappointing start, *Rainbow Six Siege* has improved tremendously thanks to Ubisoft's renewed focus on post-launch support

Because on mobile, the games are free, so if you get in and don't like it, you go to something else. Whereas with triple-A, if you don't like the first hour, you will persist because you spent money to buy the product. And very often, if you persist, you will have lots of fun.

Ubisoft has made a bigger investment in multiplayer and multiplayer-dedicated games of late. Why did you take that decision?
It's the kind of game that is more and more in demand from players. As a company, we have to adapt to this evolution in demand. So it's a question of generation: some people have been playing linear adventures, and they tend to want to continue to play that kind of game, even if they're starting to be open to other types of games.

For each revolution or disruption, there are steps where you are in the middle and the new thing is not yet very interesting. The first people that try the game might say, 'It's good, but it's not as good as I expected' and sometimes they don't want to try again. But after a while you improve the quality of this new experience, and you arrive at a level where the new people who try it love it. It always takes time to change mentalities. For us, we had no choice but to introduce the types of product that most of the customers, most of the players, wanted.

How much room is there for projects to not achieve their goals? When you have a company of such size, how do you guard against failure?
At the early stages, it's easy. You can make mistakes. It's just after you pass your alpha that it's difficult. It's becoming quite expensive!

Do you foresee a point where creating the types of games you create at the level of fidelity that the audience expects requires simply more time than you can give it?
I don't think so. I think now with the fact that games live longer, we have more and more time to spend on our games.

How did Ubisoft become the company that it is? Were you always following what the audience was asking for, or was there a conscious decision that this was the type of company you were going to be?
As I said, all over the world players can buy the same game. There are no boundaries – there's no frontier between countries, in a way. The only frontier is, 'What is the experience that the others are providing, and where do I have to be so that I can exist?' In some cases you can still make a fantastic product but it's too short, or you can do gameplay that is perfect and sell nothing. There are some constraints on the market, where you have to come with a certain level of graphics, animation and gameplay. If you don't do that, you can't sell. In a way, those elements are set by the market.

There are many ways to answer the resource problem. We found one option – which was to have talent coming from many countries – but other people can find other ways to do it.

Has the experience of running Ubisoft been a matter of adhering to a long-term plan or has it been more reactive than that?
It's something very challenging, but also very beautiful, and great to experience. You have to create the best games ever, otherwise you don't exist any more. You have the obligation to be the best in the world at what you do. That really is a very interesting challenge. It's like going to the Olympic Games and having to perform; if you're not in the top three, you're not successful. ■



The Division broke the record for day-one sales of a new IP. Tough times would follow, but it's still going strong



THE MAKING OF...



HYPER LIGHT DRIFTER

How one man's struggle informed the development of a modern classic

By Chris Schilling

Developer/publisher Heart Machine
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin US
Release 2016

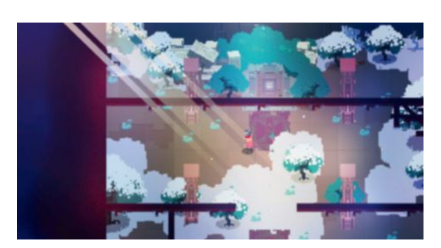
For once, we're rather lost for words. As we prepare to wind up our conversation with **Alex Preston**, we ask him what he's currently up to. "We're certainly working on things at this point," he begins, before pausing. "I can't stop working," he continues, laughing mirthlessly. "If I stop working, I die."

Such is the stark reality of Preston's existence. Born with congenital heart disease, he has been hospitalised numerous times. Before *Hyper Light Drifter*, he'd used art and film to channel his experiences with ill health; increasingly frustrated with his condition, he began to dabble in games and found a new outlet with which to express his feelings. "I didn't start to get really serious until the beginning of 2014, when I started to work with Beau Blyth," he tells us. "He knew Game Maker and talked me through it, and it ended up being a good relationship."

The two decided to work on an idea of Preston's, and began prototyping. They soon began to discuss funding options for the project, and with Kickstarter then at the peak of its popularity, crowdfunding seemed like the most viable avenue. "If I had a good enough pitch, the skill and talented people to back it up, and some reasonable goals here, it seemed like I could actually make this a reality," Preston recalls. In the meantime, through a friend of a friend he got in touch with Rich 'Disasterpeace' Vreeland, a composer whose past work includes the *Fez* soundtrack, and asked if he would be interested in scoring the game. "It was pretty straightforward. I showed him what we had with the concepts, and the really rough first draft of the Kickstarter and he just said, 'Sure.'"

Preston's years as a freelancer, working in a range of different mediums with a variety of artists, had given him the experience he needed to assemble a trailer for the campaign. "When it comes to commercial work, you learn how to pitch to an audience," he says. Still, the process took several months, as Preston built the assets for the vignettes shown in the teaser, polished them to a fine sheen, and assembled them to form a kind of narrative progression. "It has to build to something exciting that gets people interested," he says.

People were interested – and then some. Preston's modest goal of $27,000 was reached within a day. A few days later it had quadrupled its target; by the end of the campaign, it had raised over $640,000, with each of its stretch



Alex Preston and Akash Thakkar took a meticulous approach to sound design. The Drifter's death and the sound for using health vials took dozens of attempts, Preston tells us

goals met and surpassed. Preston's health had conditioned him to consider contingency plans, and he had already braced for meeting and perhaps just exceeding his initial goal. But this? "No, I wasn't really prepared for that at all," he admits. "I mean, I believed in it, and thought maybe in my wildest dreams we could make, like, triple or quadruple the goal."

"IT WAS A LOT OF DESIGN THINGS THAT WE WANTED TO STREAMLINE AND GET TO A CERTAIN STANDARD"

He and Blyth had discussed ideas that Preston had previously only considered for the "wildest fantasy outcome", but now they were better placed to make the game they always wanted *Hyper Light Drifter* to be. More money meant more staff: Preston spoke to friends and acquaintances to recruit a handful of full-timers to form a core team, including designers Teddy Dief and Casey Hunt, and sound designer Akash Thakkar. Animator Sean Ward came to Preston's attention in less conventional fashion. "He was just a fan of the Kickstarter who posted a really sweet GIF," he explains. "We ended up talking and doing some freelance together, and then I brought him on full-time and he moved down to LA to work on the project. That was just by chance, really – the chaos of the universe brought us together."

In turn, greater ambitions meant more time was needed, and a planned six-to-eight-month development schedule for the original core game became a two-year proposition. But in 2015 it became apparent that Preston and his team would need longer to reach the quality threshold they were hoping to hit. "It was due to a lot of factors," he says. "It was us figuring things out because it was our first game as a team together. It was my first game, so I was working out how to manage and cope with all the different factors of development, along with running the studio and everything like that. It was a lot of design things that we wanted to streamline, and perfect, and get to a certain standard."

And, of course, the added stress of satisfying an unexpected volume of backers. At a certain point, Preston decided there was little point in setting new dates only to delay it further: *Hyper Light Drifter* would be done when it was done. "We wanted to give ourselves the time to do it and not kill ourselves over something that we were ultimately unsatisfied with." He means that literally. "I had to give myself a little bit of time here and there for some rest and healing and treatments. All of that made it into the scheduling decisions we took."

Hyper Light Drifter's sound design and score establish a darkly elegiac mood, dovetailing so beautifully that it's a surprise to learn composer Vreeland and Thakkar didn't work together much until the very end of production. "It was another aspect of the game that was hard to express in words sometimes. Like, 'I want this clangy clash with a wonk over here, and I want it to feel like your stomach's sinking'. How do you translate that into sound? But that's the magical work that Akash did on that stuff," he laughs. "What really helped Rich at a certain point was having the level progression settled. He was really good about being cognisant of the world that we were building, and designing the sound accordingly in his tracks."

Refining the game's combat system was one of the team's biggest challenges, with Blyth (a fan of twitch platformers) and Preston (a longtime *Street Fighter* player) both particularly keen to get it right. "We're both big on gamefeel," Preston says, "though it's a really difficult thing to express in words sometimes, even between people who design it and think about it and program it." Blyth's experience working on 2D multiplayer fighting game *Samurai Gunn* meant he had learned a few things about weight and impact ▶

using Game Maker. *Mega Man Zero*, particularly its Z-Saber weapon, became a key reference point, both for the precision and satisfaction of its swordplay, and the demands of its combat.

Another classic game, meanwhile, became the perfect example of what *not* to do. "The original *Secret Of Mana* hasn't aged that well," he begins, before quickly clarifying his possibly controversial stance. "Sure, it was great at the time and brought a lot to the table, but if you actually go back and play it – as we did early in development – it's a little bit clunky. Learning about ways to avoid those pitfalls, asking ourselves, 'Why does this feel clunky? What can we do to avoid this, and make something that's more to our liking?' helped to steer the combat as much as the good examples." Right up to the very end of development, the team was tweaking values in the code and changing frames in the animation to get everything feeling just right.

One crucial mechanic, whereby the Drifter's gun clip is refilled by melee attacks, came from an unexpected source. Heart Machine had run an internal playtest with close friends and other trusted developers, before releasing the preview build to everyone else. During this, one developer piped up with a suggestion. "JW [Jan Willem Nijman] from Vlambeer said, 'Instead of picking up ammo, why don't you just have it so that hitting enemies with your sword lets you get ammo back'," Preston recalls. Since weapons used energy rather than physical bullets, he realised it fit within the game's fiction. "We tried it out pretty quickly, and I realised that it worked. It was a great dynamic, because balancing the weapons and enemies when you have a core system like that becomes much stronger, as opposed to the ammo drops we did before where it didn't feel as cohesive."

Those systems – and the player – face their sternest examinations in *Hyper Light Drifter*'s exhilarating, exacting boss fights. The giant frog in the east side of the map was the first to be designed. "It was probably not the best one to start with, because he had a lot of Z-depth issues – he's huge and he tries to jump on you. So that was a big lesson for us moving on, basically to not do that shit any more," Preston laughs. Each was designed as a way to punctuate the different regions, at the four main compass points, though heading south pits you against several smaller guardians instead. As such, Preston and his team wanted to make them memorable, and tough to beat. "You want to feel triumphant when you actually complete that challenge, because otherwise it's a little deflating, for me at least. If I've worked my way through this region, and I end up with this boss that's relatively easy, then I don't get that same sense of satisfaction or closure."

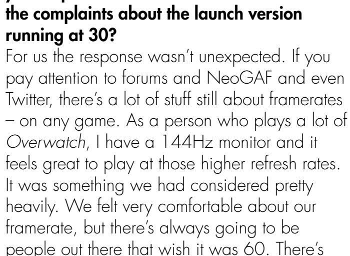
That struggle carries thematic significance, too, with Preston's own troubles evoked in the oppressiveness of the world and the challenges therein, and also in the Drifter himself. His respawn animation, as he slowly hauls himself to his feet to steel himself for the challenge ahead, is a particularly moving moment – one crucial, Preston explains, to expressing the character's burden, and by extension his own. "Whether it's the respawn or the health vials that you're consuming, or the blood he's coughing up, these aspects throughout the game were all very intentional and important to crafting this overall feel. We understood we had to balance it between expressing what we wanted from a narrative standpoint and also still making it fun. And I think overall we achieved what we set out to do with it."

The response to *Hyper Light Drifter* was overwhelmingly positive; likewise to its creator's candour about his condition. Many players suffering from ill health contacted Preston as a result of his openness, and the game's representation of his struggles, and it's clear that he found the process profoundly humbling. "I've had a lot of great online experiences with other people willing to share their intimate stories with me in a private way – people who talk about experiencing some form of meaningful connection to the game, because they've suffered their own daily challenges. Those really personal emails and messages are some of the best things I've had come my way because of this project," he says.

We ask Preston whether he found any personal catharsis in realising his own story – albeit in abstract fashion – in *Hyper Light Drifter*. He pauses to collect his thoughts, choosing his words carefully. "It's relieving in some ways to be able to tell the story that I wanted to," he says eventually. "And to be able to release some of those feelings of frustration – or at least express them, in a way. But ultimately, as much satisfaction as I got out of the experience, at the end of the day I still have to go home and be me. I still have to deal with my health issues and my circumstances, so there's only so much release that I can get from that because I still have this reality I have to come back to."

He has, however, found a silver lining in the connections he's forged with *Hyper Light Drifter*'s players. "I guess as human beings we just want to feel like we belong in some way. And we want to feel like there's somebody out there that cares, or that understands us. That's the best thing you can hope for – that people will see the work that you or your team has done and think, 'I've derived something of meaning from this, and it's going to stick with me, and I will remember it'. You can't really ask for more as an artist." ■

Q&A

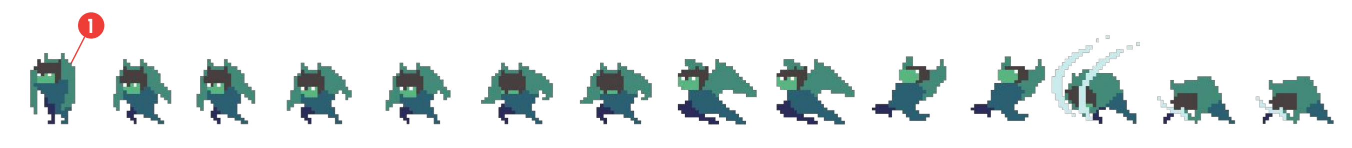


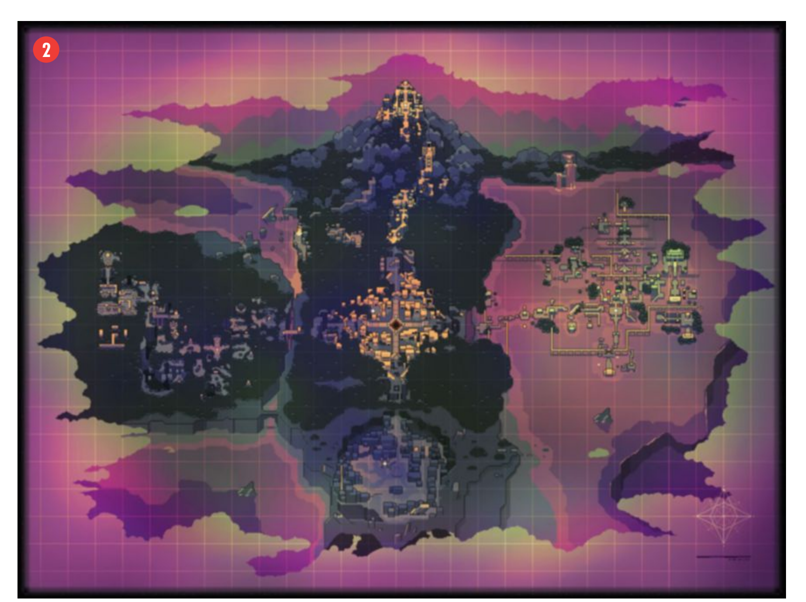
Alex Preston
Director/designer/artist, Hyper Light Drifter

You've since patched the game to include a 60fps option. Were you surprised to hear the complaints about the launch version running at 30?
For us the response wasn't unexpected. If you pay attention to forums and NeoGAF and even Twitter, there's a lot of stuff still about framerates – on any game. As a person who plays a lot of *Overwatch*, I have a 144Hz monitor and it feels great to play at those higher refresh rates. It was something we had considered pretty heavily. We felt very comfortable about our framerate, but there's always going to be people out there that wish it was 60. There's some internal logic with the way Game Maker works and the way we programmed the game that switching out the framerate would have been a seriously huge change. But I always wanted to push for 60, so I didn't give up on it. And this guy Julian, based in the UK, sat down for several months and made the 60fps version of the game. It was a lot of labour. But we ended up being 60fps because we cared.

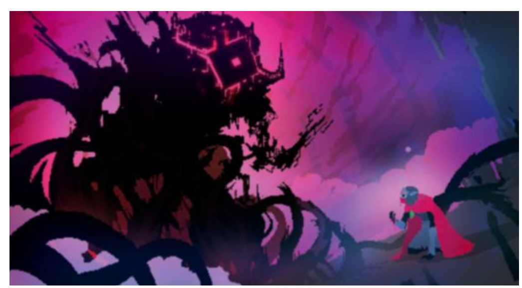
It actually took us a while to acclimatise to 60 on a second playthrough.
Oh, yeah – for us, too. We'd been building and playing the game at 30fps for years, and then to have that change, it was like, 'Whoa, OK, this is pretty night and day.'

Can we expect to see more of the Drifter?
As far as guest appearances, I'm pretty tapped out on those. I try to limit that stuff, because if I'm going to collaborate with a character of ours, I want it to be meaningful, or at least a polished experience. But who knows what can happen in the future. As for another game in the *Hyper Light* series? Again, never say never.

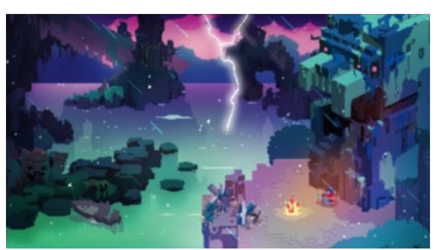


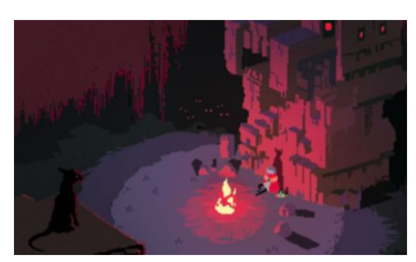


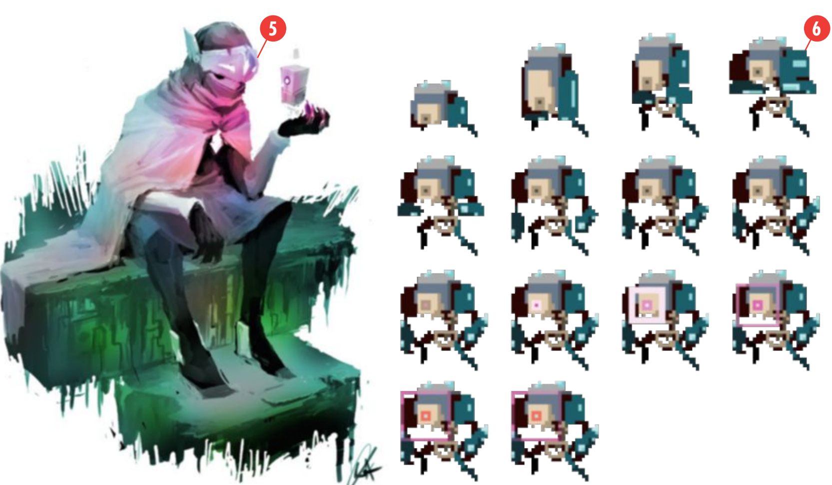












1 Dirks are the game's basic grunts. With only three hit points they'll die quickly, but they can be dangerous if they surround you.
2 Preston originally didn't want a map, hoping players would learn to memorise key locations. Eventually he realised it would be useful to give the player some context: "We wanted to be somewhat abstract so that people aren't relying on the map and bringing it up every five minutes. In other games, you end up looking at a map in the corner more than the actual gameplay area."
3 The game's opening cinematic establishes an oppressive tone, letting you know you're in for a challenge, but its air of mystery proves instantly alluring.
4 Four huge Titans lie at each compass point, offering a glimpse into the world's past.
5 Preston's own art of the Drifter captures the protagonist caught between the need to rest and his desire to press on.
6 Sprites for the Bladebot, whose melee attacks knock you over. The game originally had custom death animations for every enemy



STUDIO PROFILE

UBISOFT SINGAPORE

How one of Ubisoft's largest satellites is starting to establish its own identity

By Chris Thursten





Founded 2008
Employees 330
Key staff Olivier de Rotalier (managing director), Hugues Ricour (director of production), Justin Farren (creative director)
URL www.ubisoft.com/en-US/studio/singapore
Selected softography *Assassin's Creed series, Ghost Recon: Phantoms*
Current projects *Skull & Bones, Assassin's Creed: Origins*

Ubisoft Singapore was founded in 2008 by a small team from the French publisher's Paris headquarters, the first phase of an ongoing effort to build a game-production network in the most rapidly developing parts of southeast Asia. In the last decade, the studio has grown to over 300 people while retaining its initial leadership – and its alumni have gone on to establish Ubisoft's presence in the Philippines and Chengdu, China. Ubisoft Singapore appears in the credits for every *Assassin's Creed* game after the first, and was instrumental in Ubisoft's earliest forays into dedicated multiplayer with *Ghost Recon Phantoms*, a precursor in many ways to the wildly successful *Rainbow Six Siege*.

Even so, the contribution of any given studio to Ubisoft's overall effort is often hard to gauge for anybody outside of the publisher's closed system. Ubisoft establishes more new development houses than its peers relative to the number of existing smaller studios that it buys out, but this means that Ubisoft's satellites don't have the histories or reputations that come with the acquisition of a company such as Massive, developer of *The Division*. Internationally distributed development, now a fact of life for thousands of people working in triple-A game production, has the effect of anonymising the efforts of specific teams, studios, and regions. After almost a decade in operation, however, Ubisoft Singapore is beginning to emerge as a creative force in its own right.

Located on Fusionopolis Walk in Singapore's One-North district, Ubisoft Singapore occupies two towers of the Solaris research centre, an ecologically friendly building complex with automated systems that manage sunlight and rainwater to maintain multiple tiers of rooftop gardens. It is surrounded by science and R&D companies, part of the city-state's effort to attract ultra-modern industries such as bioengineering and nanotechnology. The game industry has a place at that table – DigiPen has a campus in the city, and Singapore's government supports its nascent indie scene at a development incubator not far from Ubisoft's offices.

This openness to international business, and the availability of locally trained development talent, were factors that drew Ubisoft to Singapore; another was the popularity of free-to-play and mobile games in the region. Asia's early adoption of these types of games, which at that time were still growing in popularity in the west, meant that Asia was among the best places in the world to train developers to create them. This was the genesis of *Ghost Recon Phantoms*, Ubisoft's first, ultimately aborted, attempt to marry its triple-A production practices to the emerging 'service game' market.


Ubisoft Singapore works closely with the publisher's studio in Chengdu, China, and Ubisoft Philippines in Biñan City

In its early days, however, Ubisoft Singapore not only had to establish a presence for itself in the region; it had to do so within the Ubisoft ecosystem as a whole, too. "Building a studio, you need to find the right balance between growing your team and setting challenging goals to grow them," says managing director and co-founder **Olivier de Rotalier**. "But not so fast that you lose the trust of the other studios."

This question of trust comes up again and again. Despite Singapore's leadership coming directly from Ubisoft HQ, every Ubisoft studio has its own culture and areas of emphasis and, in its early days, Singapore had to prove that it could be trusted to participate in the company's overall effort. "We started with a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles game," de Rotalier says. "Actually, a remake of an existing game, so it was more guided in terms of challenge. Still, the team had to ship something, and have its first experience of delivering a game."

At that time, Ubisoft as a whole was directing greater resources into *Assassin's Creed II*, intended as an expansion upon the successful first game that would establish *Assassin's Creed* as the company's flagship series. This provided an opportunity for Singapore to contribute to a series that it would subsequently work on for a decade. "We had a few guys from the *Assassin's Creed 1* team who came to Singapore when we started," de Rotalier says. "With them in the team, with this experience of working together, we could take a small mandate and start contributing to *Assassin's Creed II*."

Ubisoft Singapore's contribution took the form of asset creation but also, notably, the linear challenges that took the game's open-world structure and stripped it back to the carefully designed (and much praised) puzzle-platforming that defined the series' spiritual predecessor, *Prince Of Persia*. The Singapore studio started to establish its own voice through these sections, but building trust with Ubisoft Montreal meant respecting the game's overall brief.

"THE ASSASSIN'S CREED GUYS ARE EXTREMELY PROFESSIONAL – BUT THEY'RE ALSO UNDER A LOT OF PRESSURE"

"When you're working with teams like the *Assassin's Creed* guys, they're extremely professional – but they're also under a lot of pressure," de Rotalier says. "You need to be a solution for them, not a problem. When you start working with them you want to be the studio that will bring a smaller or bigger part of that solution – they want partners, not additional challenges.

"We needed to find the right dynamic. We found small areas where we could push ourselves and take the initiative. More than anything, it was about building trust. When you have trust and they consider that you are key to the franchise, then you can discuss taking more risks."

That opportunity arrived with 2012's *Assassin's Creed III*. Informal discussions between studio leaders resulted in the Singapore studio being given charge of a much more ambitious and more distinctive part of the game: naval combat. This aspect of *Assassin's Creed III* was ▶





Ubisoft Singapore has grown in step with the country's own videogame industry. Finding new sources of talent was a priority for Ubisoft, and one of the reasons the publisher set up in the region. Like all Ubisoft's studios, however, it has staff from all over the world

one of the biggest changes in scope in the series' history to that point, requiring new technology for simulating ocean dynamics and new designs to turn those simulations into a game. Singapore would not have been given this responsibility, de Rotalier explains, without its years of work in a supporting role.

"Step by step, it's always been a challenge. The interesting part was to keep growing the team, taking challenge after challenge to gain expertise, until the day when what we did on *Assassin's Creed III* allowed us to push innovation with the naval combat."

Naval warfare meant increasing the size of the team, at which point the availability of local development talent from Singapore's universities became a valuable asset. "We needed to grow the team quite a lot, so they definitely contributed," de Rotalier says.

Assassin's Creed III was the worst-received game in the series' history at that point: overlong and po-faced in contrast to the cheery Ezio Auditore-fronted games that preceded it. Even so, naval combat was a success: technically excellent and exciting, an unexpected but welcome counterpoint to Connor Kenway's glum adventuring. This proved to be a major boost to Ubisoft Singapore's profile.

"It helped to grow our reputation," de Rotalier says. "Not so much within the *Assassin's Creed* team, because we already had a strong relationship at that time. But for us, the recognition was really important: the naval experience was showcased at E3 as the demo, the new surprise. The team was more confident afterwards – they knew they could deliver an experience that surprises people."

Ubisoft Singapore has continued to be a player in the *Assassin's Creed* series, contributing heavily to *Unity* and *Syndicate*. Currently, the studio is responsible for a large part of *Origins*, contributing all of the game's water-related systems and leading development on Faiyum, one of the game's five world regions. This represents about 20 hours of the final game, we're told, and Ubisoft Singapore has more creative control over that slice than it has had over any of its previous *Assassin's Creed* games.

The studio has always maintained multiple development teams, however, divided between Solaris' two towers. As the *Assassin's Creed* team was growing its profile within Ubisoft's global development framework, the *Ghost Recon Phantoms* team was learning how to run a game as a live service. Launched in 2012, *Phantoms* ran until the end of 2016, when diminishing player numbers prompted Ubisoft to pull the plug. As a microtransaction-supported, free-to-play game, however, *Phantoms* provided a template for Ubisoft's current slate of premium multiplayer-only games like *Rainbow Six Siege*, *For Honor*, and the forthcoming *Skull & Bones* – Ubisoft Singapore's first homegrown new IP.

Skull & Bones represents the culmination of the two halves of Ubisoft Singapore's journey: the service game showrunners on one side, the unlikely pioneers of triple-A naval warfare on the other. The studio's specific voice is emerging through both original work and the anonymous effort it has expended on vast projects like *Assassin's Creed*, challenging the assumption that this form of game development necessarily downplays the influence of individual developers.

Creative director **Justin Farren** was a closing producer on *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*. "It became very natural for us to develop the aptitude and skill to leverage that for something bigger," he tells us. "At the same time, the *Ghost Recon Phantoms* team had been working on online multiplayer in a free-to-play shooter that allowed us to understand what it took to build a community and an online ecosystem."

De Rotalier sees Ubisoft Singapore as the equal of its larger sister studios when it comes to multiplayer games. "Because we've been facing all of those challenges, we see those other projects differently," he says. "We understand the challenges they are facing and why they are solving problems in a certain way, and that helps us to think about what we are building."

"THE TEAM WAS MORE CONFIDENT AFTER E3 – THEY KNEW THEY COULD DELIVER AN EXPERIENCE THAT SURPRISES PEOPLE"

To support *Skull & Bones*, Ubisoft Singapore has established new community outreach efforts including an in-house streaming studio. The plan is to broadcast to the community from Singapore on a weekly basis, putting its developers in front of the audience. The studio is also now in a leadership position within Ubisoft's overall structure, maintaining central control over *Skull & Bones* while elements of the game are developed by studios in Chengdu and Laguna. As developing games in this way becomes the norm, and as the lines between studio and corporate culture, blockbuster series and independent projects continue to blur, Ubisoft Singapore demonstrates how much history is quietly concealed in the endless credits of a big-budget game. ■



1 The studio made the lauded Romulus Lair sections in 2010's *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood*.
2 It also played an unspecified role in the making of *Unity*.
3 Ubisoft Singapore's naval combat work was a rare bright spot in the troubled *ACIII*.
4 *Assassin's Creed II*'s success provided the Singapore studio with a chance to flex its triple-A muscle.
5 *Ghost Recon Phantoms* marked the beginning of Ubisoft's foray into free-to-play 'service games' – the predominant form of gaming in southeast Asia.
6 *Skull & Bones* has allowed Ubisoft Singapore to develop its own take on creative ideas originally implemented in the *Assassin's Creed* series.
7 The studio also developed around a third of *Prince Of Persia: The Forgotten Sands*

PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Destiny PS4
Don't worry, this is definitely the last one. Just two weeks before *Destiny 2*'s launch, with anticipation building, we felt the urge for one final run through the Vault Of Glass, *Destiny*'s first, peerless raid. This late in *Destiny*'s life, we couldn't even scrape a full team together, but our group of five stomped on through regardless. That, it seems, is it for us and *Destiny* – until, perhaps, the night they switch the servers off for good.

Splatoon 2 Switch
The map-rotation system may mean we never play *Splatoon 2* for long, but it does make the game feel fresh every time you log in. With a seemingly constant flow of new guns, and powerful gear on offer every few hours through the Splatnet app, this is a game built on the desire to lure you back as often as possible, even if you don't stick around for long. We're only too happy to oblige.

Horizon Zero Dawn PS4
Ahead of forthcoming expansion The Frozen Wilds, we head back to Guerrilla's open world to mop up the side activities we'd been meaning to tackle before deadlines – OK, and Hyrule – got in the way. A new Easy difficulty turns Aloy into a powerhouse, which makes for a relaxing return. But we don't get far: in a sandbox as pretty as this, Photo mode becomes a real distraction.



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Play content

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

Zipping up my boots

They say you can never go back – but it's almost mandatory where videogames are concerned. This month's Play crop yields a series of explorations of what happens when old values are brought, whether willingly or kicking and screaming, into the modern age.

The most literal expression of that idea is *Sonic Mania* (p118), a game made with such slavish adherence to its progenitors' classic formula that it frequently feels more like a fan game than an official one. Blending remixed versions of old stages with all-new creations, it is the purest *Sonic* game in years; whether that's a good thing is a question of taste, but as homages go it is beyond reproach.

That works for 2D games, whose chunky pixels have a classic, enduring appeal. But 3D is another matter, meaning Sega had to treat its other trip down memory lane this month a little differently. *Yakuza Kiwami* (p110), a remake of the first game in the series, is no mere up-res: it's been necessarily rebuilt in a different engine, its forebear's static cameras replaced, its story and systems updated.



Elsewhere, dredging up the classics is a matter of ideological principle. *Lawbreakers* (p104) is built on the belief that the lightning-paced arena shooter is long overdue another runout; that elite online FPS players are currently underserved by a generation of games that prize accessibility and ease of use over a high skill ceiling played out at breakneck pace. The results can be intoxicating.

Bringing one old idea back is tricky, then – and so you'd think combining two together would be madness. *Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle* (p100) is certainly bonkers, but somehow results in a riff on *XCOM* that is one of the nicest surprises of the year. When the past gives us stuff like this, who needs the future?

Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle

Now here's something we never imagined printing: Luigi is one heck of a sniper. But then you soon learn to expect the unexpected from *Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle*. It looks like a Nintendo game, plays like a Firaxis game, sounds like a Rare game and is overstuffed with collectables like a Ubisoft game. There's a bit of everything in there: *XCOM*, obviously, but also *Super Mario World*, a pinch of *Fire Emblem*, a dash of *Captain Toad* and some puzzles and gentle gear-gating that nod to *Zelda* and *Metroid*. Sure, the Rabbids play a huge role – and their brand of anarchic, absurdist slapstick has never been more effectively used – but perhaps the best thing you can say about *Kingdom Battle* is that it's a Switch game you could easily mistake for a firstparty title, and not simply because of its star.

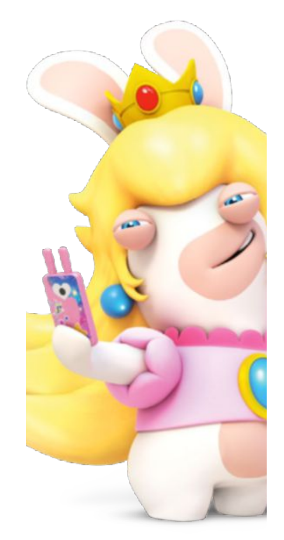
That may not come as a surprise if you've been following its development. For a while, this was in danger of being better known for the hoopla surrounding it than for its own qualities. Having leaked way ahead of schedule, its belated official unveiling at E3 saw its publisher make a real fuss of it, bringing Shigeru Miyamoto on stage, and in turn bringing tears to the eyes of creative director Davide Soliani. In the months since it's become clear that Soliani wasn't just proud of his team's work; this mattered because the man is evidently a huge Nintendo fan. So, on this evidence, is his team. *Kingdom Battle* isn't just *XCOM* with a *Mario* skin, as appealing as that may sound; it's also something that demonstrates a fundamental understanding of what makes Nintendo games tick. As with much of Nintendo's recent output, it's a game that puts its own spin on an existing genre – namely, turn-based strategy – and then throws in several twists of its own, such that pigeonholing it alongside its apparent inspirations seems grossly misleading.

Its complicated battlefields are built around two modest pieces of Mushroom Kingdom furniture. The humble brick block functions as destructible cover; partly submerged blocks give you better sight lines. Pipes, meanwhile, are often the most efficient way to cover large distances quickly, though you can also get a leg-up from your teammates to reach higher ground – from which, per genre tradition, your shots will deal more damage. Yes, this is a *Mario* game with guns, but only after a fashion: these weapons don't kill, but rather return your aggressors to their more benign natural state. From vacuum cleaner rifles to duck-shaped grenades and explosive sentries fashioned to resemble dinosaurs, they're playfully designed, and each has a chance to convey a negative status effect with a critical hit. Honey halts enemies in their tracks for a turn; ink disables weapon attacks; ice prevents opponents from using special techniques while also freezing their cooldowns.

The further you progress in the game, the more the critical rate increases, but it's unwise to rely on these as part of your strategy. The trick, instead, is to capitalise when they do occur. In the meantime, your focus should be on mastering the techniques of your squad of three. Two key rules apply: Mario's always the leader, and you must always have a Rabbid in your team. Otherwise, you can chop and change to suit the current challenge. If there's plenty of high ground and some distance between you and your opponents at the start, you'll want to take advantage of Luigi's precise shooting, ensuring you have a healer to hand since his low HP makes him something of a glass cannon. If the stage is more cramped, you might opt for Rabbid Yoshi, whose battle cry can frighten opponents into beating a retreat, giving you some valuable breathing space. Alternatively, you can get amongst them as Mario, slide-tackling enemies, bouncing off team-mates to stomp on their heads, before giving them a hearty whack with a hammer, then using Rabbid Peach's healing powers to recover after the inevitable reprisals.

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Paris, Milan)
Format Switch
Release Out now

Yes, this is a Mario game with guns, but only after a fashion: these weapons don't kill



But the real fun lies in combining abilities. Being able to switch characters at any time during their turn frees you up to experiment: activate Peach's overwatch skill (here called Hero Sight) before using Rabbid Mario's attract technique and you can bring a cluster of enemies into range of her buckshot volleys, and if you haven't moved them beforehand, you can guide them both to safety should either have been left exposed. Encase an opponent in stone, and you've got the perfect opportunity for an ailing Rabbid Luigi to use his vampire dash and leech some valuable health back. Sometimes, of course, combos happen by happy accident: a bounce shot taking an enemy into a sentry's explosive radius, for example, or a burn effect propagating to another opponent, sending them hopping out of cover and into Luigi's sights.

Your opponents have similarly diverse movesets, often analogous to your own. Units with powerful ground-pounds encourage you to keep your distance, while healers need taking out quickly. Though the heavily armoured Valkyries have relatively weak weapons, their high health, combined with their ability to absorb damage taken by nearby units, make them a nuisance. Environmental hazards add welcome variety, from explosive cover to powerful whirlwinds and molten rocks falling from the sky. Familiar Mario enemies mix things up still further: a Chain Chomp will focus its attention on the nearest unit from either side; alert a nearby Boo, and if it catches up with you it will spirit you to another part of the map.

As such, this isn't really the kind of strategy game where you can plan several turns ahead. Rather, you're forced to react to new threats on every turn, to adapt and improvise. It's a lot to take in, and at times you may feels the odds are stacked slightly too heavily against ▶

RIGHT The giant shield of World 2's ice golem forces you to aggro him with one character while the two others flank him. Given his size, he might not seem to have the longest health bar, but that's before he pulls the oldest boss trick in the book. BELOW Environmental puzzles fall into simple archetypes but they're smartly assembled, and alternative solutions often yield bonus rewards. MAIN It really does look lovely, if a little soft-focus in places, including on the battlefield when the camera zooms out to frame a Luigi long shot. It often shifts to a close-up view for critical hits, and it mostly picks its angles well, with wall shots thankfully rare







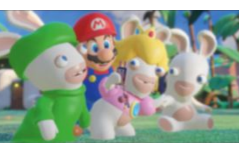
ABOVE Rabbid cannons whisk you away to these puzzles, reminiscent of *Super Mario 3D World*'s timed challenges. Some of them are fiddly, since you're not directly controlling Mario but a conga line led by pal Beep-0



you: like when successive critical hits bounce you into the path of two enemies with overwatch enabled, a single unfortunate dice roll depleting a full health bar. The range and volume of enemies means there are rarely any spaces in which you can guarantee your safety. And the environments are, at times, a shade too complex, demanding a total appreciation of 3D space without quite giving you the feedback required to achieve it.

On occasion, there are simply a few variables too many for efficient play, which would be less of a problem if story chapters didn't sometimes force you to complete two battles without a health top-up in between. Yes, you can substitute two of your team if they're struggling, but if Mario's a hit away from death as the second successive battle begins, you're in big trouble. It's mitigated by an Easy mode option, available at the start of each encounter, which refills your health and gives you 50 per cent extra to play with – and without penalising your rank for using it. The ability to reset each character's skill tree, meanwhile, allows you to better tailor your loadout according to your objective. If a stage simply asks you to reach the exit, for example, you can max out Luigi's Itchy Feet special that expands movement distance for all characters, while boosting the exit range from pipes. The further you progress, the more options you have to redress the balance.

Besides, you're given regular breaks between skirmishes to cool down. Signposts guide you to your next destination, but the path often forks or opens up, giving you room to explore a vivid new vision of the Mushroom Kingdom that's intricate and spacious by turns. The Rabbids' mischief has resulted in a jumble of ideas: the second area is both a desert world and an ice world, while elsewhere a Banzai Bill suffers the indignity



FORCE OF RABBID

The narrative contrivance that explains the Rabbids' appearance in the Mushroom Kingdom is dealt with in a brisk introductory cutscene that sees them arrive in our world in a washing machine apparently capable of travelling through space and time. They stumble across a headset that allows the user to splice two objects, with one Rabbid donning the item in question, prompting a violent reaction that eventually sees the Rabbids forced back into their craft – albeit alongside a Mario poster ripped from the wall. As such, four of the Rabbids end up cosplaying as Mario, Peach, Luigi and Yoshi, while half of the rest end up indulging their most aggressive tendencies. The headset wearer, meanwhile, partners with Bowser Jr, the antagonist of the piece in his father's absence.

You'll sometimes be prompted by a magnifying glass icon to look into the distance. Mostly, it's a chance to see what the rest of the Rabbids are up to – sometimes, bizarrely, they'll be catching trickles of lava in their mouths

of being caught up in a giant pair of underpants and an ice golem boss wields a fridge door as a shield. This irreverence isn't entirely unfamiliar, since Nintendo's always been willing to poke fun at itself, but this sprawling, interconnected world is an unexpected treat. Its secrets aren't always worth chasing (the reward for one elaborate late-game puzzle is a piece of concept art) and there are at least two sliding-block sections too many. But it's strikingly pretty – Ubi's Snowdrop engine adapting well to very different demands from *The Division* – and stuffed with secrets, miniature challenges, red-coin hunts and a host of delightful details besides. You'll see cacti plucking harp strings, and flowers trumpeting in time with the score, while the Joy-Cons offer a light shudder of feedback for every coin you collect, reverberating with celebratory glee when you smash breakable objects or locate a hidden chest.

If at times its volume of perfunctory unlockables remind you that this is a Ubisoft game, elsewhere *Kingdom Battle* boasts a generosity of ideas that feels startlingly Nintendo. Even once the story's over, there are still plenty of reasons to keep playing, with bonus challenges for revisiting completed worlds, whose final surprises only yield to an ability you gain from the final chapter, and a co-op mode that gives you and a partner a pair of characters each to control, potentially letting you concoct even more elaborate combos. It's perhaps not quite good enough to bring you to tears, but if *Odyssey* is to be Mario's best game this year, it has a pretty high bar to clear. Now *there's* something we never imagined writing.

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Post Script

Xavier Manzanares, lead producer, Ubisoft Paris

Xavier Manzanares has been involved with the Rabbids brand for several years, but *Kingdom Battle* is his debut as lead producer. Here, he talks about gaining Miyamoto's endorsement, and the challenges of working on such an unorthodox strategy game.



It's an unlikely collaboration in many ways. How did it happen?

It started in 2014. There was already a good relationship between Ubisoft and Nintendo, and then we heard about the possibility of proposing a concept involving Mario. We started to dig into what we could do, and what the Rabbids could do, and how that would make sense. The team was really small at that time, but we're all hardcore Nintendo fans and we thought about combining that passion with another passion of ours, which was turn-based gaming. We felt that was quite unexpected, and that it fit with the surprising nature of the Rabbids. So we started working on a prototype and a scope map for those ideas – we used Unity, because that way we could do it quickly. Then we started to add weapons and other elements and then we flew to Japan. It was November and we met with Mr Miyamoto's team in Kyoto. We had no clue what the response would be.

That must have been quite a daunting prospect, especially as Nintendo fans.

We knew that it would be one of the first *Mario* games made fully outside Nintendo. The pressure came from having respect for that IP and making sure the game had the animations, the art, the design, the accessibility – everything that *Mario* is known for. Even though we had a lot of passion and expertise, it was far from easy. The second challenge was figuring out how the Rabbids could be not just some characters alongside Mario, but offer something strong themselves, because after all it's a Ubisoft game. At that meeting, Mr Miyamoto said, "Hey guys, you surprised me with something I didn't expect, but this is your game, this is your concept. So please make sure that you continue surprising me now, and surprise the players tomorrow." For him it was indeed the Rabbids that really brought something fresh to the table.

Which games did you look at to try to capture that Nintendo feel?

We talked a lot about *Super Mario World*, and how it developed from *Super Mario Bros 3* but still kept in touch with the players that loved Mario before. We discussed the *Mario Kart* series, how everyone can play it, but at the same time it could almost be an esport because it's very deep. The explosive cover, the domino effect you have with some weapons and their super effects – those came out of discussions of the red, green and blue shells. And *Splatoon* as well: how Nintendo took the competitive shooter, and how it made it different with the painting. *Arms* came after our initial brainstorming, but that was also a good example of how it approached a genre in a very Nintendo way. Of course, we looked at the *Mario* games in general, how even through to *Mario Galaxy* and *3D World*, when you play you instantly feel at home. And *Captain Toad* was a really a good way to see that, even when Mario isn't there, it still finds a way to create a puzzle game that really talks to Mario fans. So we had a lot of examples. But it wasn't just a matter of copying these ideas, because that would be easy. We had the Rabbids, we had other elements Nintendo hadn't done before, we had a different engine. That's when our passion as players, not just as devs, came in. We iterated a lot, asking ourselves, 'Do we have the feeling?' Then, when [the first world] Ancient Gardens was more advanced, and we had Mario interacting with the Rabbids, and Grant Kirkhope's music, the playtests confirmed that the game had that Nintendo feeling. That's when we dug in and finalised the project around that idea.

> "When you have leaks, it feels almost like you're getting stuff stolen from you"

The leaks must have been demoralising for the team. How did you bounce back?

It's true that leaks like that are never good news. We were so focused in our little world that it was almost like we were in a cave for three years. We had so many things to reveal, we were so excited to do it, and when you have leaks, it feels almost like you're getting stuff stolen from you. So yeah, there was an impact. At the same time we knew that we would have hands-on sessions very soon. We knew we would at least be able to show how passionate we were, and how surprising the game would be. We knew that we had something to show to prove how different it is from other games. And when we saw the result at E3, when we announced the game officially, we knew that it would overcome any leaks or negativity. We were waiting for that moment for so long that in the end it went really quickly. But look at the context. We were doing a game with Mario and the Rabbids that was a strategy game on a console we didn't know anything about when we first started to work on the concept, using the same engine as *The Division*, which meant internally we had a lot of things to redo as well. Then adding co-op and turn-based elements that needed to be accessible as well as bringing something new to the table. And we didn't realise it at the time, because we were in that tunnel, but that was pretty crazy. So the announcement at E3 for us was a big moment of realisation: 'OK, we just did that.' ■



Lawbreakers

Developer Boss Key Productions
Publisher Nexon
Format PC, PS4
Release Out now

Despite a superficial resemblance to the most recent generation of multiplayer shooters, *Lawbreakers* is defined by how many modern trends it rejects. Gone are rigid class archetypes: instead, Boss Key has populated its debut game with characters that combine team-assisting utility with deep movement and combat mechanics, with players encouraged to be as lethal as their skill permits, regardless of their chosen role. Gone, too, are pace-slowing tug-of-war modes: this is a return to the unforgiving days of team Capture The Flag and King Of The Hill, spread across a handful of well-conceived modern interpretations of those ideas. Gone is any notion of camping or slow play: this is a team shooter with no snipers, no turret-builders, no reliable stationary defences and no mass healing, where massive central low-gravity zones and dynamic movement abilities prevent traditional frontlines from forming.

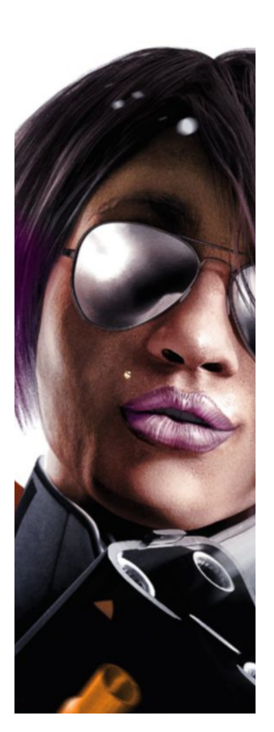
These low-gravity areas are *Lawbreakers'* flagship feature – gravity as principle law being broken in its almost-non-existent backstory – yet in reality this is only one innovation among many. *Lawbreakers* is not just notable for having one or two fresh ideas, but for the way in which it applies an experienced and critical eye to every small aspect of the action.

Lawbreakers' nine classes feel like a best-of compilation of *Quake* mods and *Unreal* mutators. The Titan carries a rocket launcher and a lightning gun, but lacks a rapid movement ability, meaning that other characters will outpace her until you learn to blindfire rockets backwards over your own shoulders to rocket-jump at speed through low-G zones. The Battle Medic stays safe through the careful management of both jetpack fuel and a powerful grenade launcher; the Wraith chains knife-dashes with knee-slides; the Assassin uses a laser-grapple to both maintain a vertical advantage and grab fleeing foes.

Although the pattern of each characters' loadout – one or two guns, two abilities and an ultimate – will be familiar to *Overwatch* players, *Lawbreakers* differentiates itself through the sheer amount of depth. Gunslinger superficially resembles Tracer (he shares a similar teleport power) but his akimbo weapons are very different. One is a submachine gun, as per his *Overwatch* counterpart, but the other is a much slower-firing hand cannon. The best players seamlessly alternate between the use of both before pausing to reload.

This same attitude has been applied to game modes. 'Push the payload' is notable by its absence, as is any form of traditional score-attack team deathmatch. Instead, *Lawbreakers* divides itself between smart reinterpretations of CTF and King Of The Hill. Blitzball is the most straightforward – a ball spawns in the enemy base and must be carried to a goal before the shot clock expires – albeit complicated by the ball's tendency to explode when the shot clock gets too low. Uplink and Overcharge, meanwhile, are mirrors of one another. In the former, teams fight over a transmitter that has to be attached to a base for a certain amount of time to score a point. In the latter, there's a battery instead – the difference being that in Uplink the base itself gains 'charge', whereas in Overcharge progress towards a point is stored in the battery. These subtle variations result in very different strategic layers, with different sets of choices to be made in the closing moments of a close match. If that seems like an overly granular or niche distinction, well, that's *Lawbreakers*: despite the muscular bravado of its presentation, this is a multiplayer shooter designed for people who think a lot about multiplayer shooter design.

Lawbreakers' nine classes feel like a best-of compilation of Quake mods and Unreal mutators

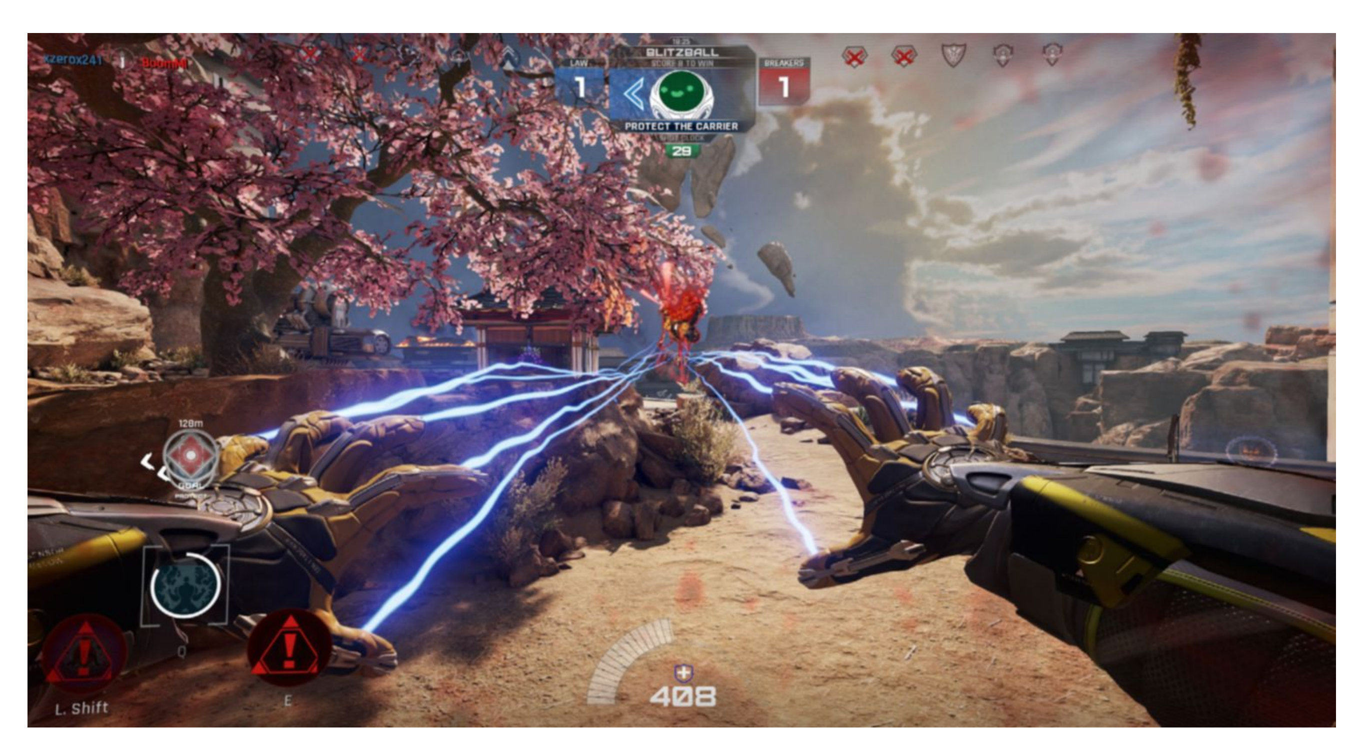


***Lawbreakers'* qualities** don't reveal themselves immediately, however. It isn't especially accessible, partly due to its high skill ceiling and partly because of how its many superficially familiar features conceal differences that are important to understand before you can get the most out of them. It requires a willingness to learn (and re-learn) on the part of the player, and the characters are so different from one another that time spent learning one does not necessarily translate to skill with another. This gives the game tremendous potential depth, and the process of sinking into *Lawbreakers* is a real delight if you're of a mind to treat it with a fighting-game player's sense of investment.

Yet *Lawbreakers* is not *Overwatch* – it's not the shooter that will convince your non-shooter-playing friends – and that warrants concern in an era where shooter audiences have proved notably fickle. As *Lawbreakers* matures, Boss Key will need to create, and then sustain, a healthy player population while respecting the game's core values. Furthermore, outside of custom games *Lawbreakers* currently only has a single 'quick match' option. Given uncertain player numbers and *Lawbreakers'* high skill cap, channelling everybody into a single matchmaking queue makes sense – but matchmaking itself can be an inconsistent experience. There are, inevitably, the frustrations that come with playing team-based games with strangers. Beyond that, *Lawbreakers* faces issues with idle players and those that abandon matches, dooming their teams in the process. When matchmaking gets it right and games are close, this is a spectacular competitive game. When it doesn't, or somebody abruptly pulls the plug, it isn't.

No matter what comes next, *Lawbreakers* is a success. It's proof, among other things, that veteran design talent really does mean something – and that the shooters of the late '90s still have something to teach the modern game industry. This is more than nostalgia: it's a paean to the genre's potential, performed by people who know it well.

8







ABOVE The Juggernaut is the finest class in the game at holding down a capture point, but its heavy armour and ability to block routes with a forcefield help make it a great skirmisher in *Lawbreakers* too

MAIN Ultimate abilities like the Titan's lightning attack are useful, but they're not game-winning or strategy-defining. They offer a shot at turning around a losing situation, or confirming a win – but the work you do when they're not available is just as important.
ABOVE The verticality of the maps means different things to every character. Open areas that are ideal for jetpackers might not suit grapplers and teleporters.
RIGHT The Enforcer's 'sprint' power is, in actuality, a localised time dilation field that speeds up both projectiles and people. Good players take advantage of both



Post Script

Cliff Bleszinski, co-founder, Boss Key Productions

Lawbreakers is Cliff Bleszinski's first game since 2011's *Gears Of War 3*, and his first since leaving Epic to establish Boss Key. Here he discusses the challenge of launching a new shooter into fierce competition without the support of a platform holder as publisher.



What has launching *Lawbreakers* been like?
It's been good. It's been slower than we expected, but that's one of those things. Everybody's so used to the traditional triple-A splash – you sell a million copies in week one and then slowly watch your playerbase go down over the following months. Whereas, y'know, we're starting with a small core group of fans and engaging with them on the regular, continuing to work on new content, continuing to fan the flames of the small kindling that we have.

Are player numbers a concern?
It's a matter of awareness, right? It's a matter of continuing to work with our partners at Nexon to make sure they spend the money in the right places to get people to try it. We know we made a good product, it's just a matter of being consistent with it, reminding people that we're not going anywhere.

Was there an awareness that making the game with a higher skill cap might alienate people, and mean that the playerbase is smaller?
Initially I was very uncompromising with what the game needed to be. One of the things that I think we could have done a better job with was onboarding. We're continuing to work on ways to make it so players learn the game. Here's the catch-22 of the game that I've spent the last three years of my life on: people like to dismiss things and be like, 'You're just a clone of *Overwatch*', but people who have actually played it are like, 'Wow, this is actually original and different', and then onboarding becomes a challenge.

I didn't want to do the exact same stuff that every other shooter does. I didn't want to do the traditional sniper, the traditional dude with a bow, the guy that builds the turret. But when you give people something different they get confused, but they also want to insist that it's the same thing – it's this weird contradiction.

"I didn't want to do the traditional sniper, the traditional dude with a bow"



Why was it important to you to not do what every other team shooter is doing?
I've played other games, and I'm not going to name names, but it feels like they've got the same archetypes that everybody else does. Even going back to fantasy – to Gary Gygax's Dungeons & Dragons – it's the same stuff over and over again. Until you can prove that you can make a medic that can actually hurt people as well as heal, or you can make a character that's a sniper without a zoom, people don't believe it – they want to rest on what's already been made.

Did you deliberately set out to riff on ideas from classic arena shooters?
It was conscious, and people like to label us as an arena shooter, but if you look at the arena shooter in the classic sense they're often paper-thin for what people expected out of a game back then. There was no progression, you weren't a character – you were the gun you picked up. There's some of that DNA in this game, but ultimately it has the depth that I believe is needed for a game in 2017 and beyond.

When you talk about those games, all that is *feel* – it's games where you really have to aim, it's a good community and a sense of flow. It's all the little things about movement. The walls are very smooth in the game so you don't get caught up on anything. There are ways to maintain your momentum with bunnyhopping, all this stuff that feels like it's been lost from the modern era of shooters, that takes a little while to learn.

Why was that stuff lost, do you think?
I honestly think that as good as *Call Of Duty* is there's almost this 'everyone's a winner' mentality that took over in games. *Call Of Duty* works because it's a great equaliser where the maps are very porous – if I come around the corner and I pop two shots into you, you're dead. There really wasn't a dance – *Halo* was one of the last games that had that good 'dance'.

Overwatch still has it, but *Overwatch* is so dependent on the meta that if your teammates out in the wild don't pick whatever classes the game thinks are necessary, you're ultimately going to get stomped.

It feels that a lot of *Lawbreakers'* complexity is in how you play the objectives, not what characters you pick.
Well, our meta is there but it's not as important as in a lot of other hero-based shooters – and the fact that, played right, any character can defeat any other one depending on the situation. One of the things about making a game like this is teaching players how to, er, play the fucking objective.

We're considering adding deathmatch and team deathmatch because especially with a game like this, you just want to get in and shoot some shit. Onboarding was an issue, and we've got to course correct with it.

Is there a concern about splitting the community?
At this point, it's one of those things where I just want players to know that we're on the other end, we're listening, and we're adding stuff. ■

Uncharted: The Lost Legacy

Developer Naughty Dog
Publisher SIE
Format PS4
Release Out now

At the start of this generation, particle effects were everywhere – the industry seeming to collectively decide that the best way to use new console hardware was to make it break up big things into lots and lots of tiny things. Those days are mostly behind us, but on this evidence there's a new bandwagon in town: HDR. So *The Lost Legacy* begins not in some undiscovered ancient ruin, but in a city at night – all the better to crank the light sources to the max and give PS4 Pro owners a visible return on their investment.

Headlamps are blinding. Streetlights and open fires have a dazzling luminescence. And then there's the Pink Lotus, an establishment plastered in shimmering, purple, neon signage. It's all a little contrived, perhaps, even cynical, the most technically proficient member of Sony's firstparty studio network making an HDR showcase for a parent company that manufactures HDR-enabled consoles and TVs. But heavens above, it's pretty. We thought there was no such thing as a *good* case of the nits, but here we are.

We expect nothing less than technical excellence from Naughty Dog regardless of whether Sony has something new to sell – and even after the sun comes up and artificial light sources fade, this is still a remarkable spectacle. Dual protagonists Chloe Frazer and Nadine Ross are dropped into the Western Ghats on the trail of the Tusk of Ganesh, a MacGuffin whose roots in Indian mythology give Naughty Dog's environment teams licence to craft a succession of gigantic, intricate, beautifully lit stone monuments to ancient Hindu gods. Out on the plains, with Frazer at the wheel of a jeep, astonishingly rendered water flows from waterfalls and pools of gloopy mud shimmer in the baking sun. On foot, fronds of foliage bend dynamically around Frazer and Ross as they creep through the long grass, lining up another stealth kill.

It's beautiful stuff, yes, but distinctly familiar as well – and that might as well be the marketing tagline for *The Lost Legacy*. Anyone expecting the sort of deviation from the mechanical template seen in Naughty Dog's playful *The Last Of Us* add-on *Left Behind* will come away disappointed from a game which hews rigidly to *Uncharted 4*'s template, to the point of lifting some of its set-piece ideas wholesale.

Elsewhere, expect the standard procession of environmental pathfinding, combat bowls that permit both stealthy and gung-ho approaches, and single-room puzzles powered by ancient mechanisms. There are hints, early on, at a more transformative take on the series formula: after an early attempt to push a crate off a rooftop to give Ross a route to the summit goes painfully awry, she suggests that it might be a good idea to give the whole crate thing a rest. The game keeps good on that promise, almost to the end – and when it breaks its own rule, it has good reason to do so. It's a sly, smart acknowledgement of a frequent criticism of *Uncharted 4*, but for the most part *The Lost Legacy* assumes that you're playing it because you want more of the same – something it is only too happy to provide.

That might be deflating for those expecting another *Left Behind*, but it's also fair enough: this was always intended to be a small, condensed singleplayer DLC pack for *Uncharted 4*, and only blossomed into a standalone adventure after Naughty Dog realised it didn't really know how to make *Uncharted* small, or condensed, or anything less than essential.

Once you get off the plains and indoors, the scene is set for a rip-roaring, wonderfully paced action adventure

The result is a game of two distinct parts, and you can see the join between them. The first is set in a single, open-ish area, with Frazer and Ross zig-zagging across it, visiting a set of towers to open a central gate, while an optional side-quest requires that you explore a further number of small structures. It's nice enough, but lacking direction and momentum – the contained environment, however large it may be, making you pine for the globe-trotting extravagance of the mainline series. Even the character work leaves something to be desired: Frazer and Ross have been in each other's orbit before, certainly, but have never worked together, and so their patter, while sharply written and believable to a fault, is all surface, getting-to-know-you stuff. The whole game just sort of washes over you, neither thrilling nor irritating, just sort of happening.

And then everything changes, as if Naughty Dog has also realised that this isn't really up to scratch. Once you get off the plains and indoors, the scene is set for a rip-roaring, wonderfully paced action adventure more befitting of the series name. Ross and Frazer's relationship deepens as the stakes are raised; there are set-pieces; larger, more complex puzzles; and a few narrative surprises, too.

It's still familiar stuff – there's an APC, a train, and innumerate crumbling ledges and last-ditch flings of grapple ropes in order to avoid fatal tumbles into the abyss. But that is a natural consequence of being, simply put, more *Uncharted*, and perhaps it would be unfair to assume that replacing the series' protagonist would mean changing the game itself. Yet *The Lost Legacy*'s shorter runtime and reduced scope means it has something many of its mainline forebears lack: focus. There is a game with neither faff nor filler, no sense of a story being stretched too thinly across a game that is too big for it. Once it gets into gear, this is a rare breed: a finely paced action game with a story to tell and no creeping sense that the needs of one are undermining the quality of the other. It may not have been what Naughty Dog originally intended to make; nor may it care to deviate from a formula the studio had already exploited. Regardless, the results show that familiarity need not always breed contempt.

8



FREEZE FRAZE
Naturally, there's a Photo mode – a standard in Naughty Dog games these days, and essential in a game that looks this good – triggered by clicking both sticks simultaneously, and accessible at any point (though if it's a cutscene, you can't move the camera). Expect the same selection of features and filters as *Uncharted 4*'s equivalent offered, but with one wonderful difference: the ability to change Frazer's facial expressions. Choosing from a selection of presets, you'll make our heroine do a duckface while choking out an enemy goon, wink while falling to her death, or strike a mock-horror pose as she swings across a ravine. Silly? Absolutely – and it's all the better for it.

ABOVE The camera's far zoom out as Frazer and Ross arrive in a new region might be a little overused, but if we made games that looked this good, we'd probably do it too. **RIGHT** Photo mode can be toggled off in the pause menu. At first we assumed this was to prevent it being activated accidentally; now we realise it's to stave off addiction



BELOW The jumping-on-moving-vehicles thing is an *Uncharted* cliché these days, but if this is really, truly the final game in this series Naughty Dog is to make, we shan't begrudge it one last outing





ABOVE Facial animation is natural, nuanced and, as you'd expect from this studio, technically remarkable. Perhaps the greater achievement is how the game turns *Uncharted 4* antagonist Nadine Ross into a sympathetic figure

Yakuza Kiwami

RPGs often fall apart a bit when you stop and wonder what happens to NPCs in need. Do they just, like, hang around indefinitely, rooted to the spot, doing nothing until you come back? If so, then we can only apologise to some of *Yakuza Kiwami*'s helpless quest-givers. To the man caught short in a loo without toilet paper, we are sorry for making you wait five hours for the packet of tissues we promised you. To the lady hanging around outside Millennium Tower for us to finally, a dozen hours later, get around to retrieving her stolen handbag, we offer our humble apologies. We got distracted, OK? We know. We are the absolute worst.

It's also why we leave Goro Majima hiding in an outsized traffic cone outside a burger joint for about ten hours. We make no apology for that, however: after all, he's had it coming. Majima's been a thorn in protagonist Kazuma Kiryu's side ever since the first game in the *Yakuza* series – though never before has he been this frequent, or troublesome, a presence.

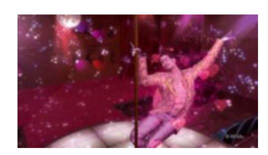
While in story terms this is a retread of 2005's *Yakuza*, there's enough that's new here to make it feel like a game in its own right, and the Majima Everywhere system is the driving force behind it. As its name implies, Majima now pops up all over the place: he roams the city looking for random battles; he muscles in on scraps you're having with other people; he even shows up during story missions. The system is at its best when it has Majima appear when you least expect him – peering in through a convenience-store window, appearing as an opponent at the underground fight club, or popping up behind the bar of a tucked-away watering hole, testing your knowledge of expensive whiskies.

Winning fights raises your Majima Everywhere rank, and at certain milestones you'll be invited to a set-piece of sorts. You might go bowling, or be asked, terrifyingly, to meet a struggling cabaret hostess who's insisting on your custom. It is, in the spirit of the series, delightfully silly stuff. And it makes a lot of sense coming after *Yakuza 0*, the prequel which cast Kiryu and Majima as dual protagonists. It would be a shame, after all that, were Majima to retreat to his old, bit-part role. And he really does look excellent in fishnets.

There's a mechanical benefit to all this daftness, too, since winning fights will let Kiryu learn moves in one of his fighting styles, Dragon Of Dojima. As the story has it, Kiryu, fresh out of a ten-year prison stretch, has lost some of his edge on the inside. Majima – and Komaki, Majima's martial-arts instructor in *Yakuza 0* – will help him back to his best. Sadly, leaving our old friend in a traffic cone for ten hours means we finish the game with barely half of the Dragon style's sprawling skill menu unlocked. Yet the other three – the slow, powerful Beast; the fast and flighty Rush; and the all-rounder Brawler – are pretty much complete, thanks to a subtle, but welcome change to *Yakuza 0*'s skill-unlock system.

Developer Sega
Publisher Sega, Deep Silver
Format PS4
Release Out now

Kiryu, fresh out of a ten-year prison stretch, has lost some of his edge on the inside



BEFORE THE GROT SET IN
Every *Yakuza* game has been set primarily in Kamurocho, and while this facsimile of Tokyo's Kabukicho red-light district has never grown in size, it has certainly become denser as the series has progressed. While *Kiwami*'s Kamurocho is busier than its 2005 forebear, it's not as seedy as in recent series entries. There's an adult DVD store in the north east, but it's just a front for a weapon store. The hostess clubs are about as racy as it gets – max out a relationship rank with one of the girls, and you'll be treated with a minute or so of FMV of them in their skimpies. Those of a Victorian sensibility should also steer clear of Mesuking, a card-battling game featuring spandex-clad female wrestlers dressed up, obviously, as insects.

In the prequel, you bought new abilities with cash, and so were punished if you didn't focus your efforts on cash-generating side-modes such as Kiryu's real-estate business. Yet here, your accrued XP is your currency. For every 1,000 experience points you earn, you gain a skill point. Costs quickly skyrocket – the most expensive unlocks cost 85 points, for instance – but big lategame battles pay out hundreds, so you never feel like you're struggling to keep pace.

While there's a degree of flexibility in the way you choose upgrades – they're split into four sections, allowing you to focus your efforts on raising health and attack power, or new moves, and so on – you'll want to pay early attention one in particular. The Heat system, which gives access to powerful attacks once you fill a meter by landing successive hits, has been subtly expanded, too. 'Kiwami' is Japanese for 'extreme', and while its use in the game's title is intended to show that this is no mere remake, it has mechanical connotations too. Whittle down a strong enemy's health bar and they'll stop fighting, stooping over stunned, a coloured aura appearing around their head. Leave them alone, and they'll claw back some lost health. Yet stand in front of them and match your fighting style to the aura's colour and a button prompt appears that will trigger a very powerful Heat-style move. It's the sort of minor tweak that has become this series' calling card – but which, in the context of a 12-year-old game, feels truly refreshing.

As, to be fair, does most of what *Yakuza Kiwami* has to offer. It may tell the same story – of a yakuza family torn apart by the anonymous theft of ¥10 billion; of two lifelong friends suddenly at war; of Kiryu, an orphan, taking another, much younger one under his wing – but it feels like a new game. It has a free-moving camera, not the original's series of fixed ones. It runs in 1080p at a near-unbroken 60fps. It is available, for the first time in the west, in subtitled Japanese audio. The original had a dismal English dub starring Michael Madsen, and remains the only game in this series to have been playable with English audio, with good reason.

On it goes. Twelve-year-old fights feel brand new because of the inclusion of *Yakuza 0*'s switchable combat styles. New substories and minigames give life to a world that, once, felt oddly empty. And in the rare moments where you feel you're retreading old ground, up pops Majima, all baby-talk and condescension, goading you into a fight – or a bowling date, or a drinking session, or a pretend zombie apocalypse – that you've definitely never had on these streets before. While *Kiwami* was presumably sketched into life primarily for new players who came on board with *Yakuza 0*, there's also plenty here for old hands to fall in love with all over again. That, you'd think, is about as good as a videogame remake gets.

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RIGHT This Kamurocho can't help feel a little emptier than recent series entries, but there's still plenty to do off the beaten path. MAIN Combat benefits greatly from the additional styles, though before you get them upgraded you may struggle. This early boss fight lasted longer than we remember. BOTTOM While most of the Heat moves you unlock early on are environmental finishing moves, later you'll acquire Heat counters, such as this finger-breaking attack







ABOVE Akira Nishikiyama (Nishiki for short) is Kiryu's childhood friend, and our hero goes to prison after taking the fall for a murder his pal commits. Despite that, they are hardly friendly for most of *Kiwami*'s runtime

Knack II

Early on, an NPC puts it better than we ever could. After seeing Knack, the gravel-voiced shape-shifter who starred in PS4's worst launch game, dispatch a few waves of enemies in his signature bland, button-bashy style, an onlooker observes: "It's hard to believe you saved the world. All you know is three punches and a kick." It's a surprising, somewhat endearing note of self-awareness, but should not be read as a mea culpa, as if SIE Japan Studio is openly copping the blame for the first game's litany of flaws. Almost four years later, this sequel commits many of the same sins as its predecessor; it has a few to call its own, too. But at least our hero has some more moves this time.

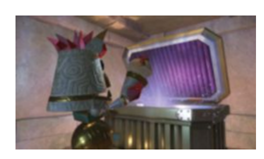
Plenty, actually. There's a basic three-hit punch combo, and another for kicks. Long presses of the attack buttons yield a heavy punch which will break even the biggest opponent's guard; a hookshot to pin down flighty opponents and yank them towards you; a boomerang that nullifies certain enemy effects; and a quick, highly damaging flurry of blows. There's a ground pound that causes AOE damage, an airborne flip kick, and a useful anti-air on loan from Guile. You'll upgrade these abilities using earned skill points, increasing the speed or power of an attack, sometimes unlocking new moves or modifying existing ones. Combined with a new guard manoeuvre that, when properly timed, can even deflect projectiles, it's a generous, flexible moveset that puts the first game's equivalent in the shade.

Sadly, using it is never quite as satisfying as you'd hope, with most moves intended to play singular roles, mandated by the design of the enemies in front of you. A shielded variety must be guard-broken before the fun can start; a speedy foe evades everything but your hookshot; if an enemy buffs itself with electricity, only your boomerang will do, and so on. Enemy waves are designed in such a way that they need careful management; hanging back at the start, dodging melee blows while lining up parries to take out the ranged threat, then working through the rest, one rote solution at a time. It means combat is more a series of lock-and-key puzzles rather than a sandbox in which to express yourself; fair enough, perhaps, but this broad a toolset invites experimentation. The game around it, unfortunately, undermines it.

The skill system itself is somewhat dreary, too. A screen-corner XP bar fills slowly as you beat up enemies and find treasure caches around the place, but you'll actually need to fill it four times to earn a single skill point, which you'll then spend in a disappointingly linear skill tree. It's a circular menu broken up into quadrants, and aside from the outmost, most expensive nodes, you'll need to unlock the full set before you can move on to the next section. Progress is slowed further when you reach the third quadrant, and the cost per upgrade suddenly doubles. We're thorough explorers, but finish the game having barely made a dent in the final section of the skill tree, and without having unlocked a single node on the outer ring. Perhaps Japan Studio intends them to encourage a New Game Plus playthrough; if we'd had those advanced skills, perhaps we'd have enjoyed our first run enough to fancy another.

Developer/publisher SIE (Japan Studio)
Format PS4
Release Out now

This sequel commits many of the same sins as its predecessor; it has a few to call its own, too



INSPECT A GADGET
Throughout the game you should keep an eye out for small openings – little crevices in cave walls, perhaps, or ventilation shafts indoors – that are just big enough to allow little Knack through. Inside you'll either find a XP cache or, more commonly, a gadget part; complete a set and you'll be blessed with a new passive ability designed to ease some of the game's frustrations. One essentially gives you an extra life in platforming sections, popping you instantly back on the platform from which you fell; others show enemy health bars on screen so you can better prioritise targets, or make it easier to collect pickups. Manna from heaven to players of a certain skill level, perhaps, but again there's frustration, with a separate series of rune pickups clearly designed to encourage repeat playthroughs.

At least the platforming side of the game is unburdened by the skill system, though as you might expect that means the action in hour 12 is much the same as it was in hour one. Still, that's oddly appropriate for a game that thinks 3D platforming in 2017 should be almost indistinguishable from 3D platforming in 1997. The action is based around a single question – whether Knack is in large or small form, switchable between at any time with a button press – and the answer to it is rarely more than how wide the platforms are. Gentle puzzle elements help break things up a bit, but in the main this is light, untaxing, rather thoughtless stuff.

That is, no doubt, intentional. And it's surely unfair to expect a blend of, say, Platinum's combat and Team Meat's precision platforming from a game that Japan Studio is obviously aiming at a certain audience. Yet despite the Saturday-morning styling of its story and the Dreamworks-lite look of its central cast, *Knack II* never quite lives up to its all-too-obvious aspirations. While there's the odd bit of decent banter between the pleasant, if mostly forgettable cast, the real problem is Knack himself: with a bassy, monotone voice and flatly unexpressive face, there's just no personality there.

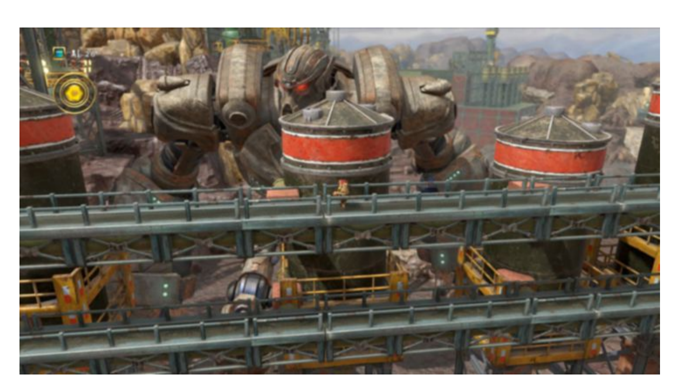
Nor is there much sense of progression, despite the skill tree. Knack starts each level small, and gets bigger as he progresses by smashing open crates full of relics. By level's end, he might be 30 feet tall – but one cutscene later, you're in a new area, and he's been cut back down to size. Yes, the alternative is having a character who, 15 chapters later, would have to be roughly the size of a small planet. But the satisfaction of stomping on tanks as if they were toy cars is outweighed by the deflating knowledge that you're minutes away from being shrunk down again.

Knack II improves on its predecessor in just about every department, which is to say it is merely flawed, rather than deeply so. Yet for all its foibles and frustrations, it's all pleasant enough. Checkpointing, a ruinous problem in the first game, is generous in the extreme; it is competently, if unremarkably made; and perhaps most importantly, it fills a vital niche on PS4. There aren't many of these entry-level action platformers around these days, after all, but they still have a role to play, training up a new generation of hand-to-hand combo brawlers and pixel-perfect platform-game players. It's hardly world-beating stuff, but it understands that, if you want to be the best, you have to start out small.

5



ABOVE A super move grants Knack full invincibility and the use of dual swords for a spell, but sadly can only be used when the developer says so. You'll activate it by hitting a crystal that appears before tricky fights







TOP Stealth is used sparingly and is meant as more of a pace breaker than a challenge, though naturally this hulking fellow will one-shot you should he lay eyes on you. MAIN A frustrating amount of spectacle is powered by QTEs. And undermined by them, too, since action set-pieces play out in slow-mo to accommodate some generous timing windows. LEFT Purple shields can only be broken with this Hadoken-style combo ender. Both appear in the final stretch of a campaign which outstays its welcome a little

Nidhogg 2

Developer/publisher Messhof
Format PC, PS4 (tested)
Release out now

Trust us, it looks much better in motion. *Nidhogg 2*'s garish, grotesque visuals sit in jarring contrast to the first game's minimalism, and that, you suspect, is precisely the point: there is no danger of you mistaking this sequel for its progenitor. The clean pixel work of the original is gone, replaced with a more detailed, but likely far more divisive, homage to the 16bit era. The extra level of detail is used to highlight, sometimes unnecessarily so, the slapstick humour this unconventional fighting game has always had in spades: melee kills are now carried out with a gleeful grimace on the victor's face, while the Benny Hill-style sprints away from a pursuer are now even funnier with those fat little legs moving like the clappers. Few would say it looks better than its austere predecessor – unless they'd always pined for a chaotic, bloody fighting game played out between two naked Homer Simpsons – but *Nidhogg 2*'s new look quickly grows on you, and only rarely detracts from the experience, when a sudden jumble of combatants, weapons and scenery combine to make the action tricky to parse.

Yet that is more often deliberate than it is an accident. Waist-high grass makes crouching opponents impossible to track; hollowed-out tree trunks provide full-body cover. Foreground scenery might briefly obscure a body part or weapon swing, and at one stage you're looking through a body of water at two warring silhouettes. Level design has also been designed to interrupt your rhythm. Ice floes rise and fall in the water to mess with your angles; conveyor belts screw with your positioning; and there are a far greater number of high or low routes that allow the clever player to avoid engagement altogether.

All of the above are smart, logical ways of building upon the classic *Nidhogg* formula. As ever, battles begin with two players in the centre of the level, which is split into multiple screens; the object is to reach the far end (player one running all the way to the right; player two to the left) to claim the ultimate victory – being gobbled up whole by the titular serpent king. Forward momentum belongs to the player with the most recent kill: only then can you push the action over to the next screen. It remains a delicious, tightly wound blade-dance, of momentum that shifts in a split second, of battles that might be over in seconds or run for half an hour. If the first game was a mixture of canny psychology and quick reactions, the sequel adds a layer of complexity through level design before you've even swung a sword in anger.

When you do eventually pick up a blade, anger may result, since it's in its weapon design that *Nidhogg 2* departs most dramatically from its template. Things start out well enough: Arcade mode begins much as the first ended, with both players wielding a rapier. Held in one of three stances – high, middle or low, selectable with the D-pad – it's the classic *Nidhogg* face-off, both reactive (matching your opponent's stance to parry attacks) and proactive (dancing in and out of range, hiding stance switches in jump and roll animations). Yet this is just an appetiser, designed to reacquaint you with *Nidhogg*'s core components while adjusting to the new level and visual design. Soon, everything changes.

There's a dagger, fast but stumpy, often better thrown than swung, since its slender form can easily be lost amid the busy scenery. There's a broadsword, which only has high and low stances, and alternates between them automatically between swings – if the blow doesn't kill, it'll likely disarm. And then there's the bow, which ruptures *Nidhogg* at its core. In the first game, distance was only ever temporary: unless you took the risk of throwing your weapon, the real action only started once players were within a blade's reach of each other. Now you can score a kill from a full screen away.

There is nuance, however. Arrows can be deflected by a sword in the correct stance; firing has a slow startup animation and long recovery time, and since the pudgy new pugilists have much larger hitboxes than the original game's stickmen, arrows that are returned to sender are tricky to avoid. You can store arrows, however, by holding the button down, increasing the startup time when you decide to shoot – and doing so in mid-air gives you a lot of control over your angle of approach.

A bow-on-bow match is tense and hilarious, like *Nidhogg* at its best. All the new weapons work well in isolation, or even in twos. A match fought with broadswords and bows, for example, with players alternating between them after each death, is a smart riff on the taut, minimalist strategy of the original. But when all four are thrown into the mix, things rather fall apart. The first *Nidhogg* worked so well because both players always had the same set of tools, unless one had thrown their weapon or had it knocked away. Now, you're never entirely sure what your opponent is going to respawn with, and it's all too easy to be caught out by an errant arrow or dagger, or be killed the second you spawn because you don't know which weapon you're holding until it's too late. A UI prompt showing what each player can expect next would do wonders.

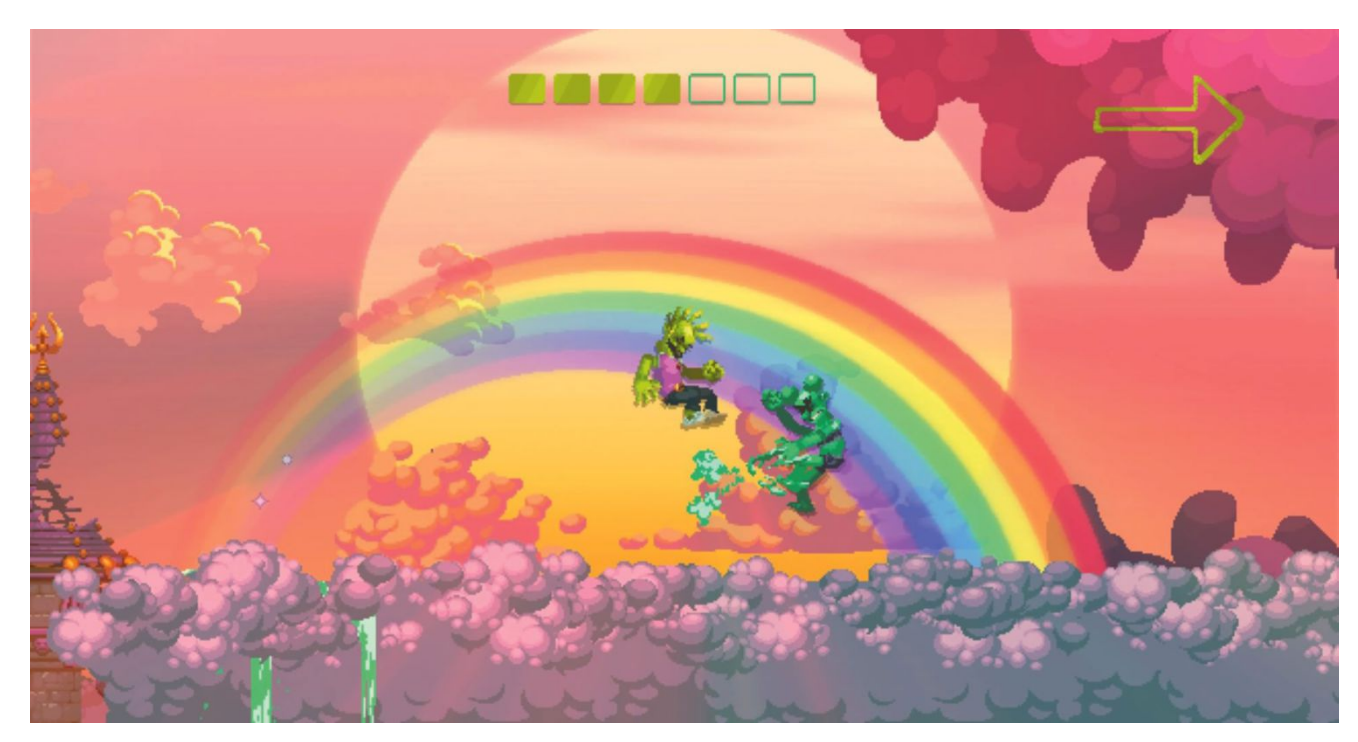
This weapon roulette is *Nidhogg 2*'s main mode – online matches use it as default, which is somewhat less of a problem than you'd think given that, once again, servers are all but empty and the handful of ranked matches we've had have been as good as unplayable. Played as intended, however, in local multiplayer, *Nidhogg 2* sings. That it only truly does so after you've delved into the options to turn various weapons on or off says much about the game: it's a cautionary tale for the videogame sequel, a reminder that bigger doesn't necessarily mean better, and that less sometimes really is more.

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Nidhogg 2's new look quickly grows on you, and only rarely detracts from the experience



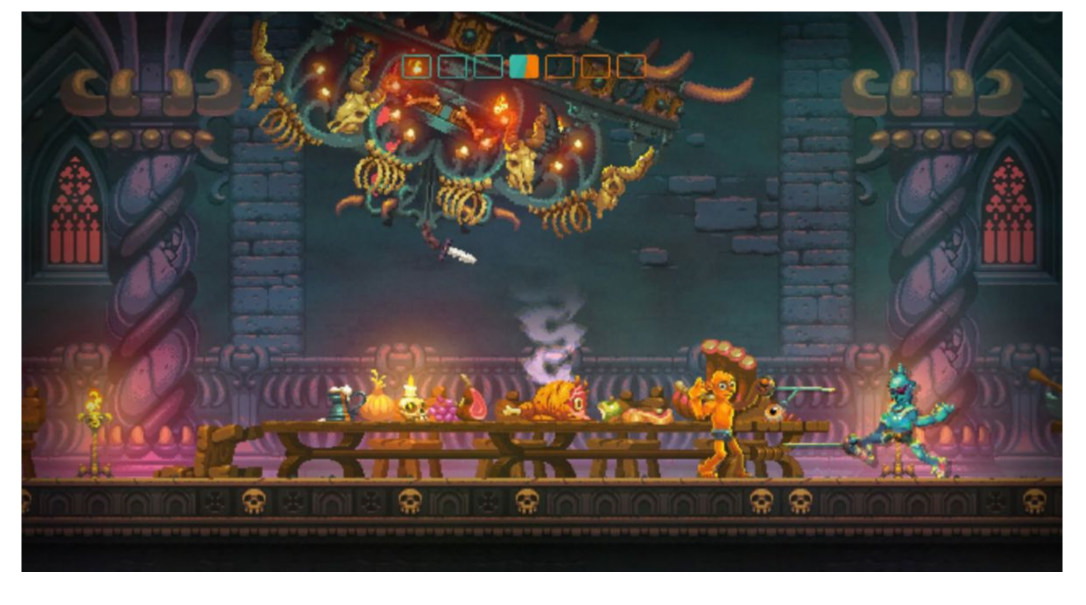
STANCE REVOLUTION
As if realising that the whole naked-Homer aesthetic is a turn-off, Messhof has included customisation options that let you change your character's get-up, though whichever of the togs, accessories and hairstyles you pick you're likely to end up looking like a low-level grunt in a 16bit scrolling brawler. Elsewhere, multiplayer mode offers a cheat menu that contains modifiers such as low gravity and the self-explanatory Boomerang and Butterfingers modes, or lets you further distil *Nidhogg*'s battle system to its core components – turning off dive kicks, for instance. All well and good, perhaps, but like a lot of *Nidhogg 2*'s new additions, ultimately unnecessary.





ABOVE Using a nightclub for a backdrop is appropriate for a game with a fantastic soundtrack, mostly provided by record label Ghostly International. Daedelus, who composed the first game's music, also contributes here





MAIN Dive kicks have been toned down considerably from the first game; if it hits, both players fall to the floor, though the victim will also drop their weapon. ABOVE You quickly learn to use the scenery to your advantage; here, the smart player will position themselves behind the metalwork. LEFT The change in visual style is at its most apparent in levels that pay homage to the original game, such as this recreation of the Castle

Agents Of Mayhem

Developer Volition
Publisher Deep Silver
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

Just imagine the elevator pitch. Based on Volition's success in turning increasingly absurd concepts into hits, it's not surprising that its idea of a Saturday-morning superhero cartoon with an adult edge got the green light. Sadly, the team behind *Saints Row* has stripped its latest open-world adventure down to the meekest of essentials, losing all semblance of flair and any meaningful connection to the series from which it so loosely spun. In lieu of 7am animated nostalgia, you get a straight-to-DVD, bargain-bin trudge. And about that 'mature' edge? All you need, apparently, is a single, repeated joke about a bad guy's genitals, and a few sporadic fuck-yous to crank the PEGI rating up to 18.

Agents Of Mayhem's most redeeming quality is its titular roster of agents – an *Overwatch*-esque lineup of colourfully designed heroes all working for the global organisation, Mayhem (Multinational AgencY Hunting Evil Masterminds). It's immediately clear that Blizzard's work was the inspiration for Mayhem's dozen disciples of chaos – each uses a mechanically similar, but visually diverse, range of weapons and abilities to fight the antagonistic cabal, Legion. There's the Johnny Cage, er, homage, Hollywood, who gyrates missiles from his groin; the shotgun-wielding man-tank, Hardtack; and Fortune, who darts around with a pair of Tracer-style auto-pistols and a floaty drone for good measure. You start with access to only these three, but the game quickly expands your pool of agents, weapons, and Mayhem powers – special destructive abilities only unleashed once you cause enough damage. Do stop us if you've heard this one before, won't you.

The agents themselves are never truly outlandish in their tools and tricks, but there's an idiosyncratic diversity between them that provides ample reason to push forward to unlocking the next. There's Rama, who skirts around with a satisfyingly punchy bow, and derby star Daisy, who rollerblades about the place while dishing out untold damage with a minigun. There are highs and lows across the cast, but the game encourages variety and experimentation by having you take three of them into battle at once.

This works from a purely mechanical perspective, but there's no narrative consequence to it thanks to the decision to only have one agent on screen at any one time, cycling through your chosen trio to pick the best one for the task at hand. It's a promising idea, but Volition essentially boils it down to whether you need short, medium or long-range combat for a particular encounter or enemy, while also giving you a way to deal with various enemy buffs and status effects. As soon as you need a different set of skills, you just switch to another of your two chosen heroes who have been lying invisibly in wait.

There are supporting cast members for your chosen agent to banter with, but dialogue alternates between beige expository exchanges and eardrum-scraping one-liners. *Saints Row* was never going to win any awards for its script, but it at least maintained a stable level of bottom-line entertainment that benefitted no end from a sense of swagger and personality. This, however, is incapable of even properly delivering the punchline to a half-decent dick joke. As you watch another of its admittedly well-crafted animated cutscenes fade, only to retake control and fight yet another lame Legion head honcho, you'll wonder why you're bothering.

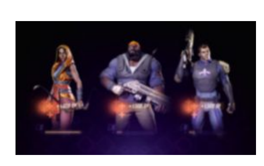
> The lack of purpose wouldn't be so noticeable in a more enjoyable, more explosively inventive game

The lack of purpose wouldn't be so noticeable in a more enjoyable, more explosively inventive game, but the level and mission design throughout *Agents Of Mayhem* does it no favours at all. There's not a single stretch of variety between when you first start and when you finish – *if* you finish, of course. The only real interaction you have with the game world is shooting at things, be they enemies or inanimate objects that need to be destroyed; the sole exception is an endlessly repeated hacking minigame. Volition sees no reason to add anything more in between. You will blast your way through the same cookie-cutter enemies, through the same claustrophobic underground enemy lairs, and only the punch of its gunplay and the rambunctious glitz of its AOE explosions stop it from being history's most soporific take on the superhero fantasy.

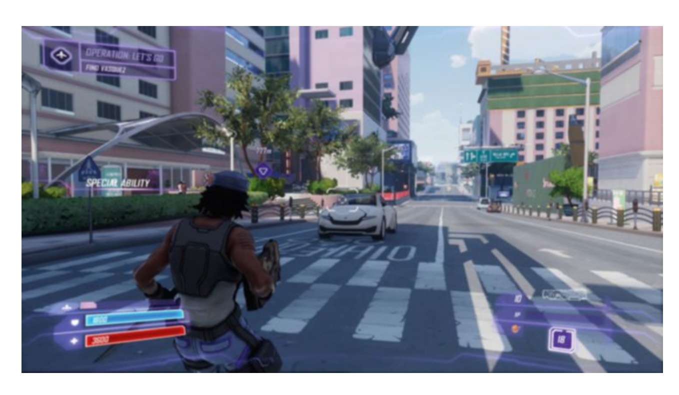
While its respectably sized but atmospherically lifeless rendition of Seoul sports a futuristic neon sheen, the many quests within that vibrant space are terribly structured. From MAYHEM's Avengers-esque helicarrier, the Ark, you beam down into the overworld to run, triple-jump and, if you can suffer the treacly handling, drive your way across the city. But you'll spend most of your time travelling manually between mission objectives. In some missions, you travel to a first checkpoint, only to have to travel to another, before finally heading to the actual mission. It's a near-constant padding exercise, the sort of open-world design tactic we thought had long been consigned to the scrapheap. To be forced through so much trudge, only to end up shooting the same enemies in the same places time and time again, is a painful disappointment.

Volition's failure here given its recent track record is in equal parts confusing and frustrating, and suggests something of an identity crisis; no surprise, perhaps, in a game that treats its cast members as mute, disposable loadouts. This is a studio that thrives in absurdity and relishes the brash boldness of a game without conventional limits. In *Agents Of Mayhem*, the limits are all around you, all of the time – from the moment you start playing to the minute you stop, it feels permanently imprisoned by its own lack of imagination. The result is a game that carries the weight of a litany of sins – a saint that has fallen far, far from grace.

4



SHAT OUT OF HELL
Set in an alternate universe following *Saints Row IV*'s Gat Out Of Hell expansion, *Agents Of Mayhem*'s spiritual relation to the Third Street Saints feels loose. Playable characters Kingpin and Johnny Gat, who's only accessible as a DLC character, form the main point of reference. Mayhem's boss, Persephone Brimstone, returns after a role in Gat Out Of Hell, too, but her appearances here are infrequent. It's another example of *Agents Of Mayhem*'s struggle between wanting to exist in its own right and being left in the referential shadow of a far better, more established series. Like the rest of the game, it demonstrates an inability to properly commit to a decision – of a desire to move on from the past, while stuck unavoidably in its thrall.





ABOVE Mayhem's communal superhero car, the Hammerhead, is by far and away the best thing to drive in the game. There's an absurd transitionary animation where your agent warps into the hotseat



TOP Seoul looks best at night when its cloud-high skyline is outlined with endless neon. Come daytime, there's no hiding the fact that *Agents Of Mayhem* often looks flat – even plasticky.
MAIN This is Yeti, *Agents Of Mayhem*'s conflation of a Russian super-soldier and Mr Freeze. The game reveals its most impressive visual tricks in combat, when the particle effects begin to fizz and fly.
RIGHT Hyper-contrast animated cutscenes flesh out each individual hero's backstory at the beginning of a mission. Rama is trying to save her home city of Mumbai. Others, like Yeti's, are similarly motivated, but underutilised



Sonic Mania

So your schoolmate's dad who worked for Nintendo was right after all. Here is, to all intents and purposes, a 16bit *Sonic* game on a console belonging to Sega's biggest rival of the time. It's a Mega Drive game in look and in spirit, made by a group of developers that grew up with Sega's mascot. It soon becomes clear that this team has a profound understanding of how those old games worked. Yet it's a double-edged sword: *Mania* carries the ring of authenticity, but it's faithful to a fault.

Its project leads cut their teeth in the fangame community, and so it's no surprise to find *Mania* wheeling out the hits – albeit in remixed form. *Sonic & Knuckles'* Flying Battery is there, as is *Sonic 2*'s Oil Ocean. And when you reach the first wholly original stage, Studiopolis, it's smothered in references: from *Daytona USA* to *Streets Of Rage* and even deep cuts like *SegaSonic Popcorn Shop*, a Japanese-only vending machine. The message is clear – 'We know our stuff' – but at times you'll wish it would ease up on the nods and winks.

Amid all the homages, there are moments of real flair. Mirage Saloon is thrillingly stuffed with ideas: sandy loops that disintegrate as you pass through them, rotating revolvers that fire Sonic like a spiky bullet, and piano keys to bounce between. The wintry, blossom-flecked Press Garden is not only beautiful, but also has an appealing gimmick, as Sonic finds himself encased in blocks of ice that slide down ramps and smash through obstructions. When it's not trying to prove its credentials, Studiopolis in particular feels so recognisably *Sonic* we had to double-check it hadn't once featured in some cancelled Saturn version.

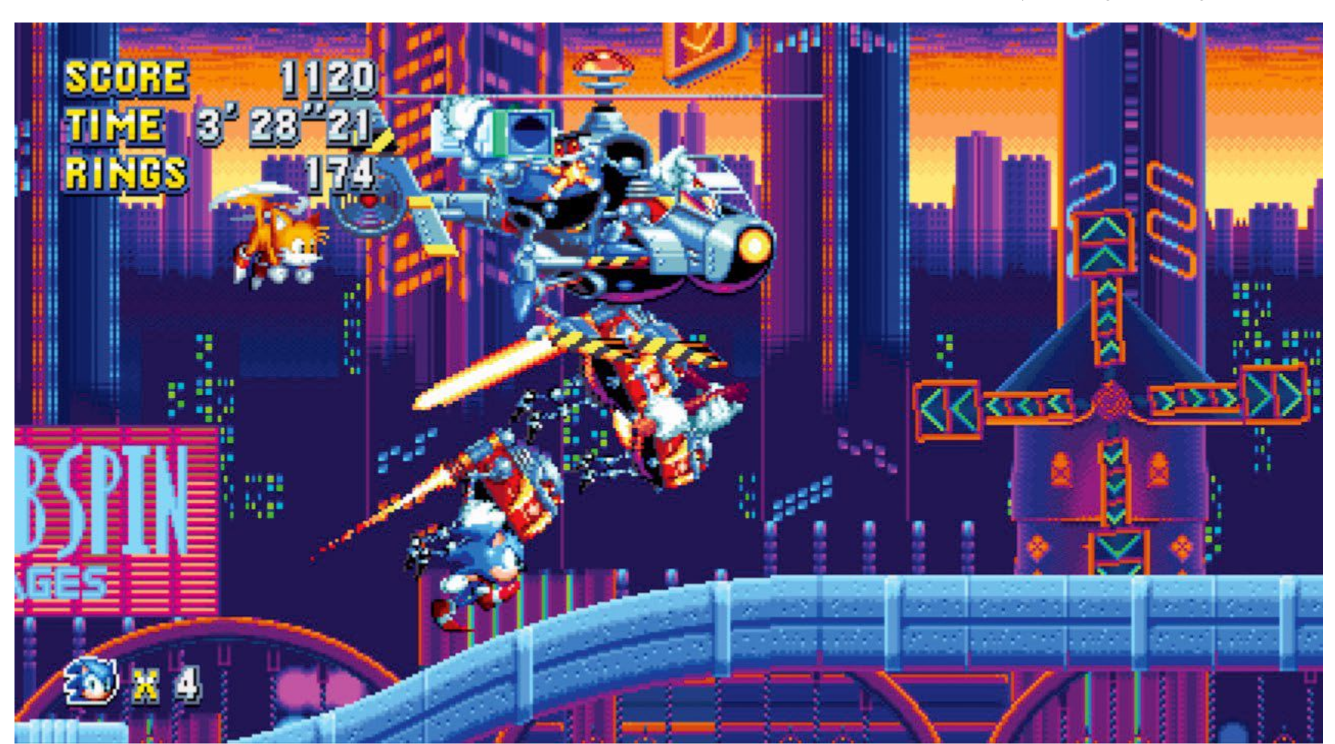
Even here, there are moments of counterintuitive design. If Sonic's biggest attribute is his speed, why are enemies and hazards so frequently positioned to arrest your momentum? Its challenge is often reliant on withholding information: hidden enemies, sudden pitfalls, springs that push you into spikes, forcing you to memorise stages you're often hurtling through too quickly to take in. Conversely, time pressures discourage you from slowing down during the sprawling later zones. The moments of ingenuity you come to admire most are those where you're least in control, and you're reminded that *Sonic* games are more fun when they're pinball tables rather than platformers: when you set this ball of energy in motion and watch him go. *Mania*'s fixation on the past may have precluded its creators from addressing historical flaws, though that was never really the aim. This convincing comeback has been designed for the die-hards – and they haven't been this well served by a *Sonic* game for ages.

7

Developer Christian Whitehead, Headcannon, PagodaWest Games
Publisher Sega
Format PC, PS4, Switch (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now



'HOG HEAVEN
Mania's presentation is its one area of unqualified success, down to the finger-wagging animation of its star on the start screen, to the main menu's earworm theme. Sharp and soft CRT visual filters are available, but it looks the part regardless of choice. It runs beautifully on Switch, too, though with one odd caveat: it can make your home menu and capture buttons slow to respond. Otherwise, those Sega blues, greens and reds look resplendent on both large and small screens.



This boss shows Mania at its best and worst. You leap over long, thin missiles while bouncing the smaller, fatter projectiles back to sender, but the scroll speed stalls your momentum, leading to unavoidable collisions

Matterfall

There's a simple pleasure to be taken in a nicely crafted spot of arcade shooting, a twitchy sortie of double-jumps and airdashes through waves of bullets and urgent techno soundscapes. Finnish studio Housemarque has built a reputation on that purity of feeling, and side-scrolling shooter *Matterfall* is its latest attempt to distill it further. Sure enough, it's Housemarque through and through, with just enough panache and pedigree to propel you through its three short levels before you've had time to think about it too much.

Not that the premise is particularly complex. Our hero Avalon has been drafted in to rid the world of an intelligent element gone wrong; naturally, this involves shooting first and entirely forgetting what a question even is, as the right stick directs bullets and a squeeze of a trigger has an energy beam materialise and dematerialise platforms. These shimmering terraces help you bounce through levels, doubling as tactical cover from enemy fire while still letting your shots through. There's a clever economy to much of *Matterfall*: a dash goes through bullets, stuns enemies and can also be comboed with a directional input to phase through matter-formed surfaces. Aim the energy beam, meanwhile, at Matter Bombs to quickly clear a swarm of foes, or melt purple crystals to free trapped civilians and snag some extra points. Score is everything, of course, your perfectionist replay runs in pursuit of leaderboard glory just about doing enough to offset the game's dearth of content.

What is there, unfortunately, doesn't have much range. The occasional zero-G section, a mere handful of enemy variations and a selection of almost wholly attritional boss fights can't offer much creative incentive for a player packing so flexible a set of abilities. And even they aren't beyond reproach: crucial actions are mapped to unintuitive buttons, with dash on the left bumper, jump on the right, the upgrades menu on a face button and no way to alter any of it. In the checkpoint-light chaos of later stages, an instinctive tap of X is enough to doom you as Avalon's feet remain resolutely glued to the floor.

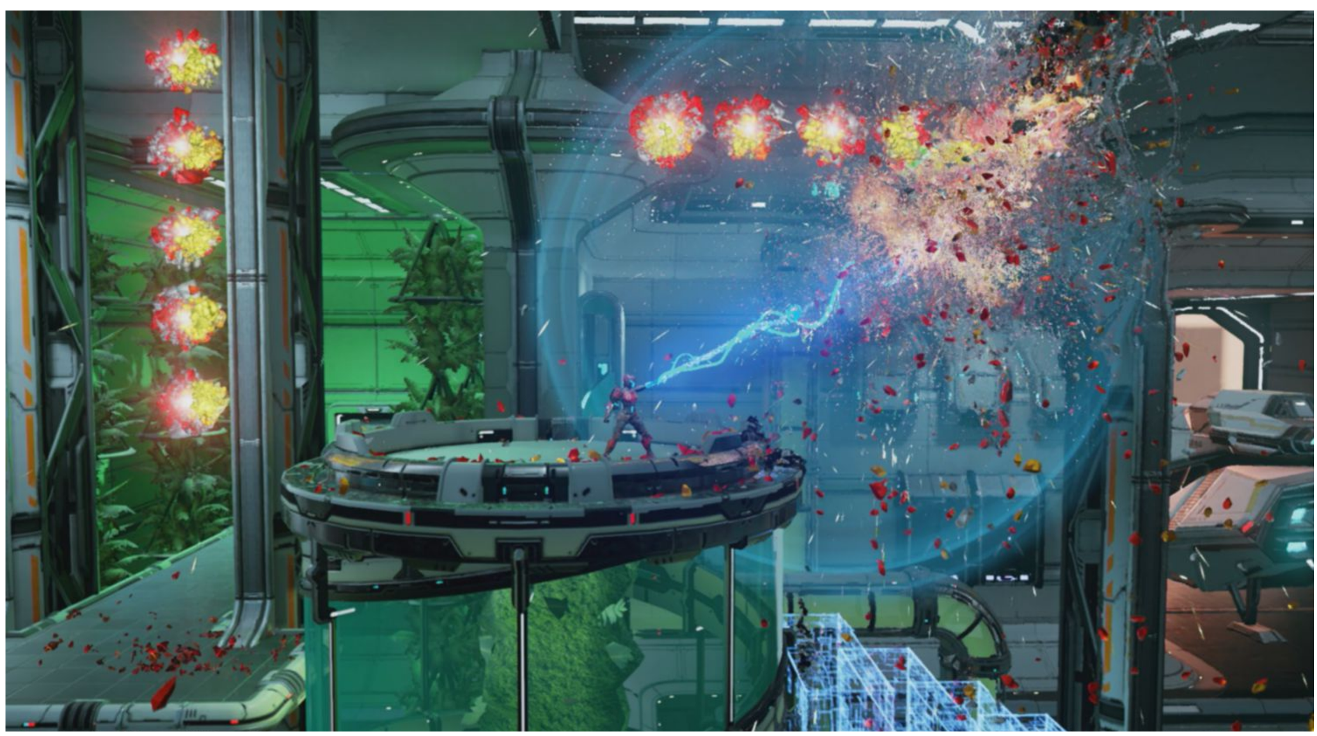
It never quite feels natural, and you'll quickly find yourself pining for another recent Housemarque release, *Nex Machina*. *Matterfall* was announced back in 2015, a full year before the studio's Eugene Jarvis hook-up was unveiled. With a short runtime, clumsy control scheme and somewhat derivative systems, it may have been in development for longer than its stablemate, but on this evidence at least, that time hardly matters.



Developer Housemarque
Publisher SIE
Format PS4
Release Out now



POWER PLAY
Augmentations can be collected throughout each level, and either grant new secondary weapons such as grenades and railguns, or offer slight damage and stat buffs. Few feel transformative, but one, that makes your Overcharge state last longer, proves essential. During Overcharge, time slows, Avalon becomes invincible and her damage is boosted. The power increase is handy in boss battles, but the invulnerability is key, a few precious seconds of threat-free damage-dealing making all the difference in the game's tougher moments.



Enemies remain fairly predictable throughout: homing-missile robots, turrets spitting orange bullets and sentries that hop in frog-like arcs. Shield-carrying foes with swift reactions, however, present a challenge



The Wonderful 101

How Hideki Kamiya tapped into his childhood obsessions for Wii U's wildest action game

By Chris Schilling

Developer PlatinumGames **Publisher** Nintendo **Format** Wii U **Release** 2013

Before you even get to fight *The Wonderful 101*'s first boss, you've already saved a runaway bus from careering off a broken highway into a school playground. You've ridden a colossal robot during its rampage through a futuristic metropolis, having defeated it by unscrewing its right arm while sidestepping explosive blasts from its left. And you've taken part in an impromptu game of baseball with a stadium-sized cannon, which you finished off by smacking its projectiles back at it. PlatinumGames' superhero fantasy begins at a pitch where most games would climax. Which, this being a Hideki Kamiya game, naturally means the only way is up.

That first boss, then. First, you must steer a flying ship to shoot a three-headed alien dragon as it flies around the city. Once you've damaged it enough, you anchor yourself to its tail, then cross the chain while it's still in flight. Avoiding the retractable spikes on its back, you then face powerful attacks from two of its heads, forming a sword to reflect its lasers back at it. Then your 100 heroes unite into a giant fist to scrape one head against the side of a skyscraper, prompting its tongue to turn into a drill, which you must avoid before stabbing it in the eye with a sword. Your group then assembles to form a new eye and assumes control of the head, biting another by the neck and tearing it off. The beast's rider – a beret-sporting dinosaur general, obviously – is distracted, crashing into a building, which sends you hurtling down towards the surface. Now you must jump between pieces of falling masonry, throwing gas tanks at the dragon's last active head before your party combines to form a giant arrow, which is fired from the bow of a plummeting statue. This stuns the general, causing him to drop his sword; you catch it mid-flight, slicing him in half. This, don't forget, is just the heroes' first operation. There are eight more to go.

It might sound like a hyperactive eight-year-old's fantasy story, full of breathless 'and then…'s, with scant consideration paid to physics, logistics or, well, any kind of complicating factor. Yet it's that naively innocent, anything-goes mentality that's the making of this gleefully unpretentious action game. Indeed, the tone captures the madcap ethos of the tokusatsu serials Kamiya grew up with, replicated here with a wide-eyed affection. That love carries through to the way its story is told, with its flashbacks, its broad streak of sentimentality and its celebration of good old-fashioned bravery and heroism. As silly as it gets – and really, that opening act isn't even the half of it – it's told with a straight-faced sincerity that's only occasionally spiked by the odd postmodern, tongue-in-cheek gag in which Platinum acknowledges the preposterousness of it all.

What makes it work is how fully it commits to its vision. The whole game is built around the notion of a collective of heroes being stronger together. Heroes are essentially powerless without their allies, so when a situation looks desperate, one of the Wonderful 100 will call for the rest to unite with them, so they can form a weapon fitting the scenario facing them. Often, it's little more than a QTE where you're asked to draw a shape, either with a stylus or the right analogue stick. But even that evokes a familiar childlike sensation: who hasn't attempted to copy the poses and actions of a beloved superhero? It lends a tactility to interactions, too. During that opening boss fight, you don't simply steer the ship, but must first form a giant hand to spin the wheel; the same goes for catching your opponent's sword as it falls. And it's often used for comedic purposes: when a robot about to self-destruct is dangling from your airship, the cry of 'Unite Hand!' suggests you're going to punch him so he relinquishes his grip; it's a delightful moment when the prompt instead invites you to mash A to tickle him off.

The Unite mechanic is the centrepiece of the game's combat systems, albeit more divisively so. There is initially some frustration at shapes failing to register correctly, though with a little practice it's easy to adjust your technique to produce more consistent results – certainly once you've switched from using the touchscreen option, which feels clumsy. Besides, not only does the action slow to such an extent that you usually get a few shots at it, you can use mistakes to your advantage: ▶

tapping X instead of A lets up to four groups split from the pack, auto-attacking enemies while you retain control of the lead troop. Still, since it's only briefly mentioned during an early mission in a throwaway tutorial while you're in the middle of a fight, many players seemed to miss it.

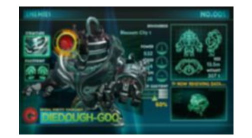
It's one of a number of choices that confounded people. Some saw the diminutive characters and anticipated a superhero-themed *Pikmin*; others may well have seen the developer's name and expected combat with the immediacy and responsiveness of *Bayonetta*. Both groups would likely have been left nonplussed by the result. *The Wonderful 101*'s battles have a very different rhythm: one that requires some adjustment, but proves terrifically diverse and flexible. Draw a larger sword, for example, and it will be slower but more powerful, damaging enemies significantly but leaving you vulnerable to counter-attacks. With the benefit of hindsight, Kamiya might wonder if forcing players to purchase the block and dodge abilities from the in-game shop might have been a quirk too far; nonetheless, they're cheap enough that most would have picked them up before they were required.

ITS GLOSSY, PLASTICKY SHEEN REMINDS YOU THAT YOU'RE ESSENTIALLY A KID SMASHING TOYS TOGETHER

Between the mission briefings, it's practically the game equivalent of a Shepard tone, the sense of constant escalation making it an exhilarating, and sometimes exhausting, game to play. But during the rare lulls, the Unite system factors into some clever puzzles. At one point, you'll find yourself floating in a body of water, needing to dive to the bottom to progress; to do so, you'll morph into a hammer, the weight carrying you to the bottom. The same weapon is used elsewhere as a shield from airborne barrages, while swords are multi-functional, conducting lightning to add power to attacks, or picking locks. Claws, meanwhile, can be used to climb vertical surfaces or prise apart locked doors, as well as offering one of the quicker attack options. The game respects you enough to demonstrate these techniques once before letting you figure out when to use them later on, but even without help there's an unswerving logic underpinning the frankly bonkers action unfolding in front of you.

There's a similar consistency to *The Wonderful 101*'s aesthetic. Take Unite Guts, the aforementioned block move, in which you form a giant, wobbly jelly that can absorb or deflect incoming attacks. Dodging sees your group spring away from trouble like a coiled Slinky; when it's upgraded, you'll roll away as a ball. Trapped citizens are often contained in alien gacha machines, your Unite Hand ability twisting the dial to release the capsules and free them to join your band. The tilt-shift style might let PlatinumGames craft set-pieces of huge scale, but its glossy, plasticky sheen reminds you that you're essentially a kid smashing toys together, concocting extravagant stories inspired by your favourite pulp TV.

***The Wonderful 101*'s lighthearted tone might be the antithesis of the DC cinematic universe, though the one thing they share in common is a bum-numbing runtime. A few enemies are blessed with at least one health bar too many**



Larger foes are introduced by a computer readout which almost doubles as a Top Trumps card, albeit with very big numbers



SECRET IDENTITIES

Each mission is stuffed with secrets and collectibles. Wandering from the critical path and backtracking to earlier areas can often reveal bonus battles against mini-bosses or special missions that ask you to defeat a number of smaller enemies. Continuing the toy theme, dozens of figurines are scattered throughout the game, many of which require the hammer ability to obtain. There are nods to PlatinumGames' past, too: drawing special attacks brings *Okami* to mind even before you're asked to make wilted flower beds flourish anew. And among the dozen or so hidden playable characters you'll find Bayonetta, Rodin and Jeanne; they will, however, take several playthroughs to unlock.



There's a motivation to rescue endangered citizens beyond simple altruism: those you tag with your Wonder Liner will be added to your group boosting attack power

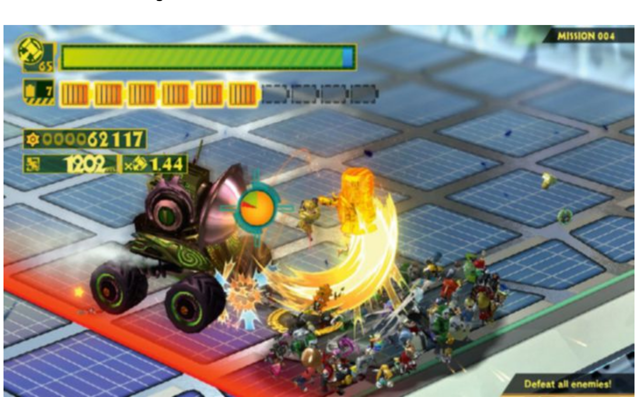
Since television heroes never die, when you do fluff your lines, you'll see and hear the unmistakable blip of a cathode ray tube powering off. And even when the going gets tough you're empowered to persevere thanks to the fantastically overblown soundtrack. The main theme ("Go, go team! Demolish those fiends! Toss them in the garbage can!") is a joy, but Hiroshi Yamaguchi's brilliant Tables Turn is the real standout: the most stirring, galvanising illustration of heroes gaining the upper hand since *Ace Attorney*'s original Pursuit theme.

And, if it's a love letter to the obsessions of his youth, it's fair to say Kamiya holds Nintendo close to his heart. There's a clear nod to *Punch-Out* in a brawl between two giant robots, while a handful of airborne shoot-outs feel like a dry run for a shot at *Star Fox*. But if it celebrates Nintendo's past, it also demonstrates a clear appreciation for what was then its present. The console that promised unrivalled flexibility got a game that embraced just about every possible input; you'd be hard pushed to say the same for many other Wii U games, even those from Nintendo itself.

In that light, it's hard to understand what the naysayers expected. Kamiya, tasked with making a game for Nintendo, drilled down to the essence of what defines the best Nintendo games: a wholehearted embrace of simple, childlike pleasures, and one so deeply intertwined with its console's feature set that you can't really imagine it on any other format. There have been suggestions of a Switch port, but it wouldn't be quite the same without the strange puzzles spread across two screens, or the sequences where you steer an alien craft on the TV by shifting the Wonderful 100 around a GamePad cockpit.

That missing one, of course, is you, as the game happily informs you during the prologue. But it's right at the very end, in its most inspired sight gag, that you most feel like one of the gang. With a deadly laser headed towards Earth, you're asked to hammer the A button for all you're worth to push it back with your own beam and save the planet; after 20 seconds of button-mashing, the camera cuts to our heroes following suit. It's a rousing send-off for a game full of heart, humour and wonder; the perfect reminder of the wisdom – or, perhaps, the glorious lunacy – of crowds. ■

You can flip wheeled enemies over with a well-timed Unite Guts – before they right themselves they can be surrounded and thrown for extra damage





Rebellion

Locations: Oxford, Runcorn

A convention-defying developer approaching its 25th anniversary

ANDY DOWLEY
Rebellion
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Job applications:
www.rebellion.co.uk/jobs

Rebellion is one of the most enduring success stories of the UK game industry, celebrating its 25th anniversary in December. With a hand in comic-book publishing since its acquisition of 2000 AD at the turn of the millennium, it has a strong portfolio and remains firmly independent, with a 200-strong workforce across studios in Oxford and Runcorn.

Are you hoping to fill specific roles currently?
Yes, we're expanding our in-house engine code, animation and web teams particularly but we occasionally hire people just because they are excellent, regardless of our immediate needs, so it's always worth getting in contact.

What's the studio working culture like?
Relaxed and social, with open-plan studios encouraging actually walking around and talking to each other. Chris and Jason Kingsley, the studio founders, are still involved in the day-to-day process of making games and anyone can talk to them. We're not a massive faceless corporation and have evolved over the years thanks to the people who work here. Most importantly, managing our own projects means we aren't affected by severe crunch. Having a good life/work balance is important to us, with flexible hours and generous holiday allowance.

To what do you attribute your 25 years of success?
Being an independent company, privately owned by people who are passionate about games, having diverse income streams and our own game engine. Plus we've been working for years now entirely on our own IP, from developing beloved triple-A titles like *Sniper Elite* and *Battlezone*, to book publishing, 2000 AD, and the exciting upcoming Judge Dredd: Mega-City One TV show. Our passion for original ideas shows through in finished projects, for example *Zombie Army Trilogy*'s success, after initially being just for fun and something different to do. And now *Strange Brigade*… the variety here is fun and great for job security. Also key to our longevity is Chris and Jason being interested hands-on directors who make responsible business decisions.

"WE LOVE BEING AT THE LEADING EDGE OF GAME TECHNOLOGY, BEING ABLE TO ADAPT IMMEDIATELY TO NEW TECH"

What advantages does using your own bespoke engine, Asura, give you?
We love being at the leading edge of game technology, being able to adapt immediately to new tech like VR and offered early access to top secret new hardware! *Battlezone* was one of the very first games showcased for PlayStation VR, and Asura's multithreading capabilities meant AMD recently chose *Sniper Elite 4* to demonstrate their new Ryzen and Threadripper CPUs. We can implement ideas and fix bugs quickly ourselves, without waiting on external companies, and add to Asura with every game we make. It's a proven, industrial-grade game engine, tailored exactly for our needs. We're expanding our engine team to keep this up – for leading technology, we need leading coders.

What are you looking for in potential Rebellion employees?
Show personal interest in Rebellion – apply directly, telling us what you think of our games and why. Show your passion for game development, it's really important to us that the UK game industry continues to thrive. Be confident about what you can bring to Rebellion, we want people who are buzzing about potential projects. For programmers we also need excellent C++ and the ability to work with large existing codebases, to keep us at the cutting edge of technology. If people want to work on leading tech, on some of the UK's best-loved games IPs, then Rebellion is a great place to work. ■


Rebellion's open-plan office encourages a collaborative working environment, where ideas can be easily shared among staff – and with co-founders Jason and Chris Kingsley. Most importantly, even with 200 employees it retains the convivial feel of a smaller studio

Syberia 3

B.H. SOKAL















JAMES LEACH

Postcards From The Clipping Plane

Conveniently ignoring the serious side of videogame development

As fascinated as you probably aren't by the state of creative writing within game development, there is, perhaps, only so much to say about it, and I think perhaps I've said all of it. So now it's time to bow out with a kind of 'too long; didn't read' summary of the last few years.

We decided that dragging famous people into game voiceovers is only worth it if they're perfect for the role. Nobody is or has ever been impressed by the ability of a developer to throw a large amount of money at a celebrity and secure them for a couple of studio hours on their day off. Then there was the fearless expedition into the world of female game characters. There were quite a few elements here, and it was the topic I received the most feedback about. The upshot being that if one of the most important attributes of any of your characters is that she is female, you've pretty much already failed. And if she's female and there to be attracted to the male protagonist, you've failed harder. If she's there to try and make young male gamers attracted to her, you probably should be dragged into a dairy and shot.

It's hard to avoid noticing the sheer confidence of writing in games now. Remember the time when games slavishly copied movies? James Cameron's 1986 film Aliens has a lot to answer for. But there was also the slightly patronising love of 'quirky British humour' in games. I was in the frequently depressing vanguard of this, and if I had a quid for each time something I'd written was described as 'Monty Python-esque' I'd have enough for a bottle of whisky and a shotgun.

Times have changed, though. I think *Portal* was the moment I knew that nothing would ever be the same again. We went from being like other forms of entertainment to having other forms of entertainment want to be like *us*. There will always be room for plumbers rescuing princesses from castles, but when you've got the quotability of *Skyrim*, the savage satire of the *GTA* games and the intensity of *The Last Of Us*, you're in a world which is very comfortable with itself.



I cunningly hid identities because I wished, and still wish, to retain my liberty and genitalia

But what about the mechanics of story in games? The three-act storytelling structure imposed on a world where the player has freedom? Are we creating a narrative, or giving the player all the building blocks to create their own? Such deep, pivotal and possibly stupid questions led to an exploration into the realms of emotion and connection in games. How is it possible to make a player care about the story? And to care about the character they're inhabiting? Games have a freedom which storytelling doesn't; that's why it's called storytelling. But the very strength of stories is that the audience can't influence them. You have to go along for the ride, and as anyone who's let a young child have ongoing input into a bedtime tale knows, ceding control never ends well. The answer, we decided, was… Well, I can't recall now. It'll be in the back issues somewhere. But we did get it sorted, definitely.

Also sorted were some of the troublesome elements game developers were determined to employ for a while. Pets in games, for example. Bad idea. Love interest. Also a dreadful concept. Goofy sidekicks. That's unlikely to work either. There was, looking back on it all now, a surprising amount of curmudgeonliness on the back page here. For me, at least, it was cathartic. Cheers.

Through all this, I frequently referred to situations, games and companies I was actually involved with. I cunningly hid the identities of these for the most part, because I wished, and still wish, to retain my liberty and genitalia. Looking back, some of it must have been immediately recognisable to those who were there. The videogame world contains some of the smartest people around, but like any industry it also has its share of clowns. I cling to the hope that nobody wants to recognise themselves as such, and so I think I got away with it. The same with some of the projects. I seem to have devoted just enough time to staying the right side of the NDAs. It has, at times, been a minefield.

So what about the future? Games aren't going to change. The technology is going to advance, but in terms of writing, we'll keep on trying to engage, entertain and immerse the player in our worlds. Everything is largely getting more refined, though. Graphics, audio, detail, dialogue, story, the lot. We're a long way from climbing the other side of Uncanny Valley, and maybe we never will. But we're here to stay.

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer whose work features in games and on television and radio

Illustration **Box Kite Curve**



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